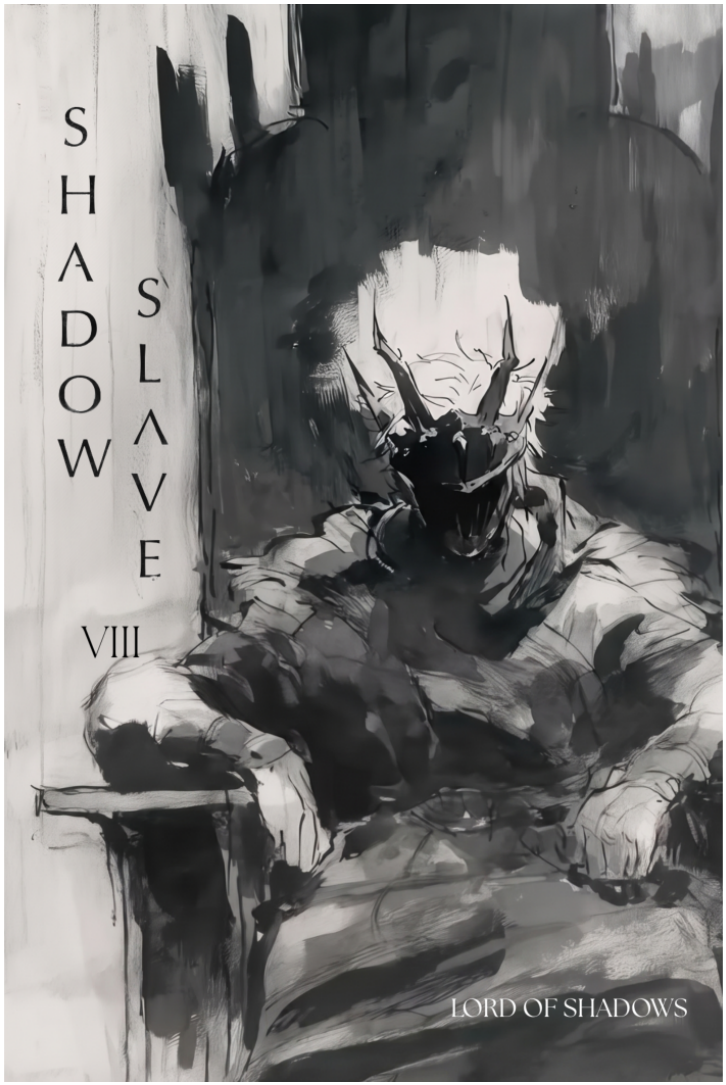
SHADOW SLAVE
VIII
LORD OF SHADOWS

Shadow Slave

Volume-8

Lord of Shadows

Chapter-1591: Years Later

There was a rustle, and a gentle breeze caressed Sunny's face. He awoke slowly, allowing himself to enjoy the sweet moments of comfort and peace that dwelled on the edge between dream and wakefulness. His bed was soft, warm, and cozy… today, it was especially hard to abandon its familiar embrace.

After a while, he sighed and opened his eyes.

The sun was yet to rise, but the sky outside his window had already started to brighten. The wind blowing from the lake made the curtains flutter, filling the modest bedroom with the delightful smell of freshness. Even after all these years, Sunny was still sometimes startled at how clean and pure the air of the Dream Realm was.

He took a few deep breaths, rubbed his face, and rose from the bed.

His room was not very large and not very luxurious. However, it was very cozy. There was a bed, a nightstand, a case with various books crowding the shelves, a writing desk, and a simple dresser. The furniture was made out of natural wood, crafted with affection and care. There were a few decorations added here and there, as well as plenty of signs of the room being well lived-in.

Well, of course it was. He had been spending his nights here for a long time, after all.

Putting on simple clothes and summoning the Nebulous Mantle, Sunny yawned, tied his hair back, and left the bedroom. He splashed some water in his face, then went to the kitchen and brewed himself a large cup of strong, fragrant coffee.

Finally, holding the steaming mug, he left the house and sat down on the porch, intending to enjoy his coffee while watching the sun rise.

It was rather hard to get his hands on coffee beans in the Dream Realm, but today, Sunny wanted to pamper himself. It was his birthday, after all.

He was turning twenty-six.

…Of course, no one in the world knew that.

Taking the first sip of his coffee, Sunny smiled slightly and looked up. A few of the brightest stars could still be seen, shining in the pale lavender expanse of the morning sky. Just at that moment, the gentle sun finally crested the dark line of the distant horizon, imbuing the sky with a beautiful golden radiance. The soft twilight of dawn was imbued with a hint of bright daylight.

He watched the sun rise while enjoying his coffee.

Despite the beautiful sight, Sunny felt a bit of melancholy. He looked down with a wistful smile.

'...I am older than mom was when she passed now.'

It was a strange feeling. When Sunny was a child, his mother was the definition of an adult to him, and adults were magical creatures who possessed wondrous and incredible powers. But now, he was an adult himself, which was why he was able to realize… that his mother had been a kid herself.

She was gone, but both her children were alive and doing well. There was precious solace and consolation in that fact, so Sunny did not feel too sad.

Well, alive was a given, but he wasn't too sure about doing well. During these last four years, he had gone through a long rough patch… and had even done a few very stupid things. Still, it was looking better now.

This peaceful morning he was able to enjoy was proof.

Sipping on coffee, Sunny watched as sunlight finally reached the lake and reflected on its clear surface. The lake was vast and picturesque, so calm that its surface was like a mirror.

A grandiose, magnificent white castle rose from the lake, with vermilion flags fluttering on its many towers. It almost seemed too beautiful to be real, like something from a fairy tale. But, of course, it was truly there.

The beautiful castle of white stone was Bastion, the Great Citadel of Clan Valor, where the King of Swords held his court. It was also the heart of a populous city that had grown around the lake in the last four years.

After the Sovereigns had revealed themselves, most of the remaining civilian population of the Southern Quadrant — around two hundred million people — was evacuated directly to the Dream Realm, divided between Bastion and Ravenheart, and gradually funneled into lesser Citadels.

Later, the Dream Gates were opened in the other Quadrants, and even more mundane people received a chance to relocate into the Dream Realm.

Even if few understood the true meaning of these events, the gradual exodus of humanity from the waking world had already begun. For now, most of those who left were from the fringes of society — people who did not possess citizenship, and therefore did not receive their share of the scarce resources needed to live a proper life on the dying Earth.

But Sunny knew more than most. He had no doubt that, sooner or later, everyone would leave… if they were given enough time. As the years passed, the situation in the waking world would gradually turn worse and worse. There would be more Nightmare Gates, more powerful Nightmare Creatures, and less space for humans to exist. Until the entire world was swallowed by the Dream Realm.

Granted… humanity was growing stronger, too.

The Chain of Nightmares had been like a turning point in history. Before, the number of Awakened in the world was relatively limited… there were a hundred thousand Awakened or so, a few hundred Masters, and a few dozen Saints.

After Antarctica, these numbers changed. By now, there must have been no less than a million Awakened out there, with several thousands of Masters and more than a hundred Saints guiding them all to fight against the Nightmare Creatures. The balance of power that had been maintained for decades was finally broken, and humanity set out on the path of no return.

There were hundreds of millions of mundane humans residing in the Dream Realm, too. Many lived in the sprawling cities surrounding the three Great Citadels, but most had settled across the lesser Citadels scattered around the human-controlled regions of this dangerous world. Dozens of towns had popped up here and there, all developing swiftly.

Of course, life in the Dream Realm was not easy, and people had to go through a period of adjustment before becoming accustomed to this new, harsh reality. But since most of them were either refugees or from the outskirts of the overcrowded siege capitals, they were no strangers to discomfort. Instead, the lives of many had only improved after leaving the waking world behind.

They could not return, anyway. Or rather, they could not return without risking their lives. The moment a mundane human entered the Dream Realm, a Seed of Nightmare was planted into their soul. However, that seed would not bloom, summoning them into the First Nightmare, unless one of two conditions had been met. One of the conditions was stepping back into the waking world.

The other was leaving the territory of the Domain to which they had pledged their loyalty. As long as the Sovereigns willed it, their mundane subjects were protected from the ravages of the Nightmare Spell.

This was another reason why the number of Awakened had increased so much in the last four years. Those who wished to challenge the First Nightmare could simply request it from the great clans instead of waiting to be infected by the Spell. Many of them even survived.

Sunny took another sip of coffee and turned his head, looking at the lively city that had grown around the beautiful, calm lake.

Of course, it could not be compared to a vast human hive like NQSC. However, there was still a startling amount of people here, at least a dozen million of them or so. Another million or two lived in the castle itself.

Building a city like that in a short amount of time was a great undertaking, but with thousands of Awakened participating in the construction, all possessing inhuman strength and powerful Aspects, it happened surprisingly quickly. Now, the city looked neat and tidy, with two- or three-storied houses lined along lovely streets.

The houses were built from white stone, their roofs covered by colorful red tiles. There was plenty of trees and greenery, as well, with parks, gardens, and water features placed harmoniously here and there.

Modern technology might have been hard to use in the Dream Realm, but nothing prevented the city planners and architects from using the vast accumulated knowledge of humanity and all the processing power of the waking world to do all the preparatory work in advance.

In short, Bastion looked very pretty and picturesque. It was also usually quite lively.

This early in the morning, however, most people were still asleep, which was why Sunny was able to enjoy his coffee surrounded by peaceful silence.

…Oh, he owned a house in Bastion as well. More than that, it was a house many would be jealous of.

Although not as prestigious as being able to live in the castle itself, his property was on the very shore of the lake, with its back windows opening straight to the water.

It was an elegant one-story cottage, which was seemingly built from brown bricks, with a sloping tiled roof and a tall chimney. There was a small garden in the back and a neat lawn in front of it, with herbs and flowers growing in ceramic pots.

Since it was situated at the end of the street, few people ever passed by.

If they did pass by, however, they would have seen a modest sign hanging above the door of the cottage.

It read:

"Sunny's Brilliant Emporium: Café & Memory Boutique"

Chapter-1592: Humble Shopkeeper

As the city was slowly waking up, Sunny finished his coffee and leaned back, enjoying his last moments of peace. He did not have a lot of regular customers, but there were some. They were probably going to start arriving soon, which meant that he would be busy for the next few hours.

Before that, however…

He glanced at his shadow, his gaze becoming distant for a moment.

Then, a familiar voice whispered into his ear:

[You have slain a Great Demon.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

It was his own voice.

Sunny brushed his fingers across the black bracelet on his left wrist and slowly exhaled. The bracelet was a Memory he had created a while back… it was a crude knockoff of the Spell, replacing some of its simplest functions. Announcing his kills was one of them.

He shifted slightly.

'That… went better than expected.'

He had just killed a Great Demon.

Well, technically, it was his other self that had done it. His avatars were not beholden to the maximum range of Shadow Control, so there was a vast distance between them.

Currently, Sunny was simultaneously in three separate locations. His original body was here in Bastion, enjoying a peaceful life in the company of the gloomy shadow — he had kept that guy so that people had no reason to ask why he was walking around without a shadow at all. His second self was incarnated by the happy shadow, keeping an eye on Rain.

His last avatar was far away, in one of the most dangerous regions of the Dream Realm, incarnated by the haughty shadow.

Haughty, naughty, creepy, and crazy were together. Saint, Fiend, Serpent, and Nightmare were with them, as well. Unlike the first two, the third Sunny knew no peace. He wielded the most power of the three and spent his days in eternal darkness, often clashing with dreadful abominations.

Of course, the three of them were actually one person. So Sunny had been enjoying a peaceful morning in Bastion, accompanying Rain, and battling the Great Demon at the same time, all along.

But he had grown good at compartmentalizing over the years, allowing him to at least pretend to live three separate lives.

'So that thing is finally dead, huh.'

It had taken him almost a month of meticulous preparations to finally attack the abomination in its lair. Sunny had expected to sustain heavy injuries, but the battle ended well. With the demon's death, there was no one left to challenge him in the immediate vicinity of the temple…

Sunny lingered for a moment, then summoned the runes. A field of familiar symbols appeared in front of him… the runes themselves might have been the same, but they looked a bit differently. He had designed this whole thing himself, after all, tying the enchantment to his memory, perception, and the black bracelet.

So, Sunny had taken liberties to change the look and feel of the field of runes to his taste.

The runes read:

Name: Sunless.

True Name: —

Rank: Transcendent.

Class: Terror.

Shadow Cores: [6/7].

Shadow Fragments: [1591/6000].

His True Name had been lost in the Tomb of Ariel, and he could not earn another while banished from fate. As for his shadow fragments… seeing the measly number, which had been very slow to increase in the past four years, made Sunny a bit disheartened. But there was nothing he could do about it.

He had slaughtered countless Nightmare Creatures after becoming a Saint. Their blood would have been enough to fill the lake surrounding Bastion… the problem was, his soul only grew stronger when he killed Corrupted and Great abominations, which were not that easy to find, and harder still to survive.

So, he had only managed to slay a mere thousand of those, or so. Of course, if anyone heard Sunny being disappointed about only killing a thousand Corrupted and Great Nightmare Creatures, they would have slapped him across the face. But for him, it was a sign that he would not be able to become a Titan anytime soon — unless he found some shadow creatures to hunt, at least.

Sadly, Sunny had not discovered any in all these years. It seemed that shadow creatures had gone entirely extinct during or soon after the Doom War. Come to think of it, discounting Fiend, he had never encountered a corrupted shadow creature. Were there none, or had they remained somewhere far away, in a place that he wasn't able to find yet?

Shaking his head, he glanced back at the runes.

Memories: [Silver Bell], [Puppeteer's Shroud], [Extraordinary Rock], [Endless Spring], [Weaver's Mask], [Shadow Lantern], [Shadow

Chair], [Overpriced Saddle], [Weaver's Needle], [Nebulous Mantle], [Handy Bracelet], [Quintessence Pearl].

There was no surprise there. Sunny made his living by creating Memories, but strangely enough, he was not in a hurry to create many Memories for himself. He did not need to seek power in them, because he himself possessed tremendous power. With Onyx Mantle and Soul Serpent, most of his needs were met.

Which was not to say that Sunny did not plan to forge himself new equipment in the future. It was just that what he wanted to create was too ambitious to be crafted in a hurry, and he had only opened up his shop a year ago.

For now, the only Memories he crafted for himself were the [Quintessence Pearl], which was basically an improved version of the destroyed Essence Pearl, and the [Handy Bracelet] — the poor replacement for the Spell. He also modified Ananke's Mantle a bit, renaming it the Nebulous Mantle in the process.

The Quintessence Pearl and the Handy Bracelet were simply for convenience, but the last one was of vital importance for him. After all, it was the Nebulous Mantle that allowed him to live in Bastion, pretending to be a mere Master. If people found out that the humble shopkeeper was a Saint… things would become complicated.

Sunny turned back to the runes.

Echoes: —

Shadows: [Onyx Saint], [Soul Serpent], [Nightmare], [Shadow Fiend], [Marvelous Mimic].

The [Marvelous Mimic] was what Sunny had called the latest of his Shadows, which was created from the modified Covetous Coffer and the shadow of the Mordant Mimic. It was the only Shadow that he kept with himself in Bastion instead of sending it to his third avatar.

The reason was that he needed it. It was next to him right now, actually…

The unassuming brick cottage where his shop was located was, in

fact, not a cottage. It was the Marvelous Mimic, who had taken the shape of a picturesque house. Its interior existed in a separate dimension, which allowed Sunny to hide a lot of things below ground.

His house could also walk, swim, shapeshift, devour intruders, and produce soul coins. Among other things.

Sunny had lost his home in NQSC after his existence was erased from the tapestry of fate, so he made sure that his new home would be able to follow him wherever he went.

Smiling faintly, he glanced back at the runes.

They read:

Attributes: [Lord of Shadows], [Flame of Divinity], [Blood Weave], [Bone Weave], [Soul Weave], [Onyx Shell], [Fateless].

The [Master of Shadows] had evolved into the [Lord of Shadows] during his Transcendence. Its description was succinct…

[Shadows recognize you as their ruler.]

With it, all his Abilities had been strengthened and enhanced. The range of his Shadow Control was now north of forty kilometers, and he could extend his shadow sense just as far. He could remain the form of an incorporeal shadow indefinitely, and cover great distances with each Shadow Step. The depths and intricacy of what he could manifest wild shadows into had also increased tremendously.

In short… it wouldn't be an exaggeration to call Sunny a demigod.

Or rather, to call his third avatar a demigod. This version of Sunny was just a modest Master with a Utility Aspect who ran a cafe and sold Memories from time to time. All people could call him was… harmless.

Speaking of running a cafe, the customers would be arriving soon.

Sunny smiled and took a last look at the runes.

Aspect: [Shadow Slave].

Aspect Rank: Divine.

Innate Ability: [Shadow Bond].

Master: —

Aspect Abilities: [Shadow Control], [Shadow Step], [Shadow Manifestation], [Shadow Incarnation].

Aspect Legacy: [Shadow Dance].

Flaw: [Clear Conscience].

There was another string at the very end of the field, as well. It read:

…Citadel: Nameless Temple.

Those words did not mean that Sunny was anchored in a Citadel called the Nameless Temple.

They meant that he owned it. It was his Citadel, which he had personally conquered and claimed.

That was where his third avatar was, and that was the reason he had to kill that Great Demon. After becoming the lord of a Citadel, Sunny also became rather territorial.

No Nightmare Creature was allowed to exist in the vicinity of his temple, because there was already an apex predator living there. Preparing for the moment when the Death Zone turned into…

Well, anyway. That was for his third avatar to worry about. This Sunny had nothing to do with it.

Dismissing the runes, he stood up and stretched.

It was time to open the shop.

Chapter-1593: Pleasant Morning

Before Sunny went inside, he lingered for a few moments and glanced at the magnificent castle one last time. Then, he slowly looked up.

Out there, high above the tallest tower of Bastion and slightly to the side, a beautiful island was hovering in the sky, bathed in the golden light of dawn. A great pagoda of pristine white stone rose from it, just as majestic as the colossal ancient fortress.

The Ivory Tower.

The wandering Citadel looked harmonious drifting above Bastion like a satellite. In recent years, its lady and her warriors had been sent to defend remote human enclaves on countless occasions, their fame and renown growing with each improbable victory.

The image of the immaculate white tower was slowly becoming a symbol of hope for those besieged by Nightmare Creatures in the Sword Domain.

Which was more than a little bit fitting.

Sunny looked at the Ivory Tower for a few moments, his expression remaining perfectly neutral. Then, he averted his eyes and sighed.

'She has been in Bastion for almost a month now. That is unusual... I thought Anvil would send her to some other godforsaken battlefield by now.'

With that, he went to enter the cottage. Before he could, however, there was a sound of unhurried steps approaching from further down the street.

Turning his head, Sunny saw a petite young woman with short dark hair walking over. She looked sleepy, covering a yawn with a small

palm. Unlike most Awakened, the young woman stubbornly clung to wearing modern clothes. Her black slacks and white blouse, admittedly, did not stand out in the eclectic fashion of Bastion.

Here, one was just as likely to meet a person wearing a stylish business suit as a person clad in enchanted armor. The former was even more in vogue, considering that it took some effort to transport material possessions from the other side.

The young woman stopped and stared at him sullenly.

"Hey, boss."

Sunny smiled.

"Hey, Aiko. It's a wonderful morning, isn't it?"

Her expression did not change, but her gaze turned even darker. A moment later, Aiko looked away and sighed bitterly.

"I still don't understand why you insist on opening so early… the sun is not even up yet, for the love of gods…"

Chuckling, Sunny opened the door.

He had found Aiko shortly after returning to civilization, which happened about a year ago. Back then, the young woman was barely making ends meet. According to her, her Memory shop went out of business because the main inventory supplier disappeared somewhere in Antarctica.

It was a curious thing.

Aiko seemed to remember that she had had a partner, and even that her partner had been responsible for providing the Memories for the shop. However, her memories were vague at best, and her attention seemed to wander away every time she tried to concentrate on who that partner had been, exactly. She would even forget trying to recollect the details, switching to thinking about something else.

That was how the world covered the glaring hole in existence where Sunny used to be. No one remembered that he had existed, and for

events that were too important to be entirely forgotten, a vague and abstract substitute took his place.

Just some guy. An inconsequential stranger. A fleeting acquaintance. A comrade who had perished long ago, their face and voice erased from memory by the passage of time. People vaguely recognized that someone had been there, side by side with them, but as soon as they concentrated on these memories, their minds naturally wandered to other matters.

The same went for the material traces he had left in the world. There was that famous movie, for example… The Devil of Antarctica. It had been inspired by his actions during the Southern Campaign. People knew that the main character was based on a real person, but were incapable of thinking deeply about who that person was.

So, they just assumed that the main character was a representation of the collective heroism of countless soldiers who had perished in Antarctica.

Oh… Sunny was dead, officially. Not that anyone knew or remembered. Therefore, his citizenship status had been revoked, his accounts frozen, and his house in NQSC resold.

In short, not only had everyone forgotten him, but they were even incapable of becoming aware of having forgotten him.

His smile turned brittle.

…In any case, Aiko had been reluctant to pledge her allegiance to the Legacy Clans or the government. She had lost her job as Kai's manager when he enlisted, and the Brilliant Emporium was on the verge of going bankrupt. That was when Sunny found her and purchased the ownership of his own business back from her.

After all, although the countless Nightmare Creatures he had slaughtered while aimlessly wandering the Dream Realm had not given him a lot of shadow fragments, they had provided him with numerous soul shards. He was secretly an extremely wealthy person.

Since Sunny needed a capable manager to help him run the

Emporium, he hired Aiko once again. Now, she was playing the role of his assistant… as well as, begrudgingly, assistant cook.

"Come on. The early risers will be here soon."

The two of them went to the spacious kitchen and started preparing for the day. Sunny was preparing the ingredients, while Aiko went over the books with a frown on her face.

"Boss, we are running low on most ingredients. You need to make a trip to the waking world soon."

"Boss, we are not making enough money. We only sold one Memory in the last two months! What even is the point of calling ourselves a Memory Boutique? Give me some funds for a marketing campaign, I'm begging you…"

"Boss, there will be a delivery from the Beast Farm later today. I still have bruises from dealing with them the last time… you do the honors!"

Listening to Aiko nagging, Sunny let out a sigh. Running a business wasn't easy.

Especially while dealing with crafted Memories and desperately trying to not attract Clan Valor's attention.

As he was almost done with the preparatory work, the first customer finally arrived.

It was a familiar face.

Chapter-1594: Familiar Faces

It was still very early in the morning, so the streets of Bastion were mostly empty. However, someone had already come to the Brilliant Emporium.

As the door opened, a melodious sound spread through the interior of the Marvelous Mimic. There was a beautiful silver bell affixed above the door, its soft and pleasing ringing welcoming the entering customers.

Of course, it was the Sonorous Silver Bell.

Sunny looked up from what he was doing, then wiped his hands on his apron and left the kitchen. There was an elderly gentleman standing at the door, dressed in a patchy enchanted robe. He had messy grey hair, absentminded eyes, and a pair of bushy eyebrows that seemed to have a life of their own.

Sunny suppressed a smile.

"Awakened Julius. You are here early."

The old man looked at him and smiled politely.

"Ah, Master Sunless! Well, I am a night owl. Plus, you know what they say, the early bird gets the worm. Wait... I am mixing metaphors..."

He hesitated for a moment, then coughed.

"Sorry. I seem to remember that you dislike birds. In any case, it is nice to see you on this pleasant morning."

Sunny nodded.

"Likewise. The usual?"

As the old man assumed his favorite spot near the window, Sunny returned to the kitchen. There, he went about making coffee for his former teacher, while at the same time preparing a light breakfast.

'We are running low on coffee beans, indeed. I'll have to visit NQSC this week, won't I?'

While Brilliant Emporium could not contend with more prestigious restaurants in Bastion, hot beverages like coffee, tea, and hot chocolate were Sunny's selling point. That was because he exclusively used the pure water from the Endless Spring to brew them, which made each cup especially invigorating.

He ground the beans, poured the fragrant powder and a little sugar into a copper cezve, then sent a wisp of essence into the stove and placed the cezve on the fire. The stove had been created by him by reversing the enchantment of a long-destroyed charm of his, [Memory of Fire], which made kitchen work much easier.

When the ground coffee heated a little, he took the Endless Spring off the shelf, poured water into the cezve, and placed it back on the fire. Ideally, he should have been using a pan of heated sand instead of open fire, but, oh well… there were limits to how fancy Sunny was willing to be.

While the coffee was brewing, he ignited a second flame and put a pan on it. Then, Sunny opened the icebox and took out a few eggs, butter, and a jar of milk…

The icebox had also been created and enchanted by him, in the best attempt to imitate the luxurious refrigerator he had greatly enjoyed owning in the past. In fact, it was more of a large cabinet than a box, made out of natural wood instead of synthwood. So, in a sense, it was even more luxurious.

There was no ice inside, either. Instead, the enchantment was the reverse of another charm he had lost, [Memory of Ice]. There was a luminous enchantment, too, activated when the door of the cabinet was open. A third enchantment created a dedicated reserve of essence that powered the first two, so Sunny just had to replenish it once every few months.

Breaking the eggs with one hand and putting butter on the pan with the other, Sunny mixed the eggs while slowly blending milk in and poured the resulting mass into the melted butter.

He waited for the omelette to set, then effortlessly flipped and folded it, finally adding some mushrooms, vegetables, and ham. Well… monster ham, to be precise.

Soon, a perfectly cooked omelette and a cup of fragrant coffee were ready. Putting them on a tray, Sunny glanced at Aiko, who was still going over the books, and left the kitchen once more.

Placing the plate and the cup in front of Teacher Julius, he curiously glanced at the book the old man was reading. Its cover was hidden by a leather jacket, but he knew the title from a glance.

It was The Exploration Report on the Tomb of Ariel, by: Nobody.

Sunny was the nobody in question, of course.

Even though he had lost credit for his previous academic papers, it seemed like a shame to just leave all the knowledge he had accumulated in the Third Nightmare go to waste. So, even knowing that it would cause some problems, he published a research paper anonymously.

He kept the existence of the Plagues and everything he discovered in the Estuary to himself, though, concentrating on the unique culture of the River Civilization, and especially on the stories of Weave he had heard from Ananke, instead.

Not only because there were some things that were better left unsaid, but also because some knowledge was simply too dangerous to share. There were very few people in the world who could withstand a mere mention of the Forgotten God, anyway, while many could be harmed by being exposed to it.

However, even with these redacted parts, his report had caused a furor in academic circles.

…It had caused a furor in some other circles, as well.

Namely, among the Great Clans.

There were supposed to only be six people who had ventured into the Nightmare of the Tomb of Ariel, after all. And since none of them was the author of the report… then who the hell was? And how did that person know so much about the Great River?

Needless to say, the existence of the Exploration Report, written by nobody, was under a lot of scrutiny. Which was why even a respected professor like Teacher Julius chose to hide its cover under a jacket and read it in the Dream Realm, as opposed to on his communicator in the waking world.

When the old man smelled the delicious fragrance of coffee, he got distracted from his book and looked up.

"That smell! Ah, I've been looking forward to it all week."

Sunny smiled and pointed to the Exploration Report.

"Are you reading that report again, Awakened Julius?"

The old man looked around and pressed a finger against his lips.

"I am! But shhh! You know this amazing work is supposed to be banned, Master Sunless."

He picked up a fork and sighed dejectedly.

"Such a travesty. The depth of knowledge and wisdom the author of this remarkable work possesses is truly astounding. Their discoveries and insights have truly overturned our understanding of the history of the Dream Realm, especially its later stages. Not to mention the incredible revelations about the origins of the Nightmare Spell they documented!

Such a person should be lauded and celebrated, not hunted. Those Legacies are really out of line, this time."

Sunny smiled politely.

"Who do you think the author is?"

Teacher Julius looked thoughtful for a moment.

"A person of utter brilliance and integrity, no doubt! Well… they should be an old fossil like me, most likely. Probably one of the first-generation Saints? Otherwise, I don't see how they could have survived the harrowing depths of the Great River, let alone avoid being found out by the… those who are trying to find them."

He sighed.

"Well, a young man like you won't understand, Master Sunless. Being an explorer is a noble calling, you see. Uh… not that there's anything wrong with making an honest living like you do. Gods know I would have been lost without your excellent cooking skills! Please excuse my outburst. This old man was being impolite."

Sunny chuckled.

"No, no… you are right. Please enjoy your breakfast."

With that, he bowed slightly and took a step back.

The Silver Bell rang again, announcing the arrival of the next customer…

Chapter-1595: Builders of Things

The new customer was a young woman wearing a sharp, but somewhat wrinkled formal suit. Her white blouse was buttoned up all the way despite the warm weather, and her dark hair was gathered in a bun. There were dark circles under her deeply intelligent, but tired eyes.

Unlike Teacher Julius, who visited Bastion in his sleep, she was a mundane human residing here permanently. It also seemed like she was visiting the Brilliant Emporium after burning the midnight oil and working through the night, instead of doing so first thing in the morning.

The young woman glanced at Sunny, frowned slightly, then gave him a curt nod.

"Master Sunless."

He hid behind a polite smile.

"Miss Beth."

"Ah, Chief Bethany! You've made it!"

Forgetting about Sunny's existence, Beth turned to where Julius was sitting and smiled brightly.

"Professor Julius! Of course, I have."

Sunny received her order and retreated back into the kitchen. As he started preparing a cup of hot chocolate for the tireless scientist, he sighed and shook his head.

"She doesn't change…"

Aiko, who had just finished running some calculations on a wooden abacus, gave him a curious glance:

"Oh? Do you know Chief Bethany, boss?"

He lingered for a few moments, then shrugged stiffly.

"We had a few brushes in Antarctica. I doubt she remembers, though."

Then, he looked around and added:

"Can you pass me salt?"

Aiko continued to abuse the abacus, but the salt shaker floated from the shelf into Sunny's hand. That was her Dormant Ability — a weak form of telekinesis.

…Which really put her integrity in doubt, considering that she used to run a gambling den in the Bright Castle.

But who was Sunny to judge?

Shaking his head, he finished making the hot chocolate, poured it into a ceramic cup with care, and walked out of the kitchen.

As he was placing the cup on the table, he caught a part of the conversation between Teacher Julius and Beth. The old man was saying:

"So, how are you and your team doing?"

Beth let out a long sigh and picked up her hot chocolate, warming her hands on the cup.

"Ah, we are drowning in work. There are rumors that our colleagues in Ravenheart had a breakthrough recently, but you know how it is… both sides are hoarding information instead of sharing it. The guys from Valor are also tightening up security, as if they are wary of spies. Madness, it's pure madness!

They do understand that we could have achieved results twice as fast if there were fewer roadblocks for proper cooperation?"

She grimaced and shook her head.

"In any case, developing the infrastructure of Bastion has been a titanic undertaking. Thousands of engineers have given it their best, but with how strange the Dream Realm is, there are countless challenges. That is where we, the scientists, are supposed to step up."

A distant expression appeared on Beth's face for a moment. She took a sip of her hot chocolate and savored it for a bit.

Her gaze cleared a little.

"But even with all the data we gathered during the Chain of Nightmares, shielding technology remains simply ineffective. Actually, the entire approach is flawed, but the bigwigs are too myopic to realize that we should not be concentrating on developing better insulation, to begin with. So… that was why I went and became a bigwig myself. Now we are on the right track, at least."

A subtle smile appeared on her face.

"Actually, there is progress! We are very close to creating a working model of a power station. There is no reason for electrical power not to work in the Dream Realm, right? And yet, it doesn't… for now. But mark my words, I'll have the streets of Bastion illuminated by electric lights before the end of the year. And from there, all manner of things will become possible."

Teacher Julius raised his hands and applauded her silently.

"Electricity, huh? Wonderful, simply wonderful! What are you using to generate the current? Soul essence, I presume?"

Beth shrugged.

"I mean, it's not that complicated. Most electricity in the waking world is still produced by steam-powered turbines. It's just the method of producing heat, and therefore steam, that differs. So, we are using heat. Granted, finding a way to produce heat from soul

essence is the ultimate goal. A truly sustainable source of energy…"

After that, Beth's explanation became too technical for Sunny to understand. He had long retreated to the reception desk, of course, but his hearing was greatly enhanced when compared to that of mundane humans — he was a Saint, after all. If Sunny wanted, he could eavesdrop on the conversations between the residents of the surrounding houses, let alone those of his own customers.

Not that he was in the habit of doing such things.

In any case, it seemed that what Beth was talking about was beyond Teacher Julius, as well. After a while, he coughed in embarrassment and said in a hesitant tone:

"Well… that sewage system you guys built is already remarkable enough. I mean it, truly! A thing like that can make or break a city…"

Beth rolled her eyes.

"Oh, gods. Don't remind me. The earth here is still full of the roots left behind by that titan… any kind of subterranean construction is a nightmare…"

Sunny sighed and turned away. The Shadow Chair, which stood behind the reception desk, creaked quietly as he shifted his weight.

'She… is living well, at least.'

When hundreds of millions of people entered the Dream Realm, there was an instant crisis having to do with how and where to settle them, of course. That crisis was not too terrible, though, because the Great Clans had been secretly preparing for an event like that for a long time.

As a result, many of the best specialists in all things having to do with building a robust infrastructure had been either found among the refugees or recruited from the waking world.

The prospering city around Bastion had not just appeared on its own — countless engineers, architects, scientists, craftsmen, and professionals of all kinds had worked incredibly hard to make it a

reality, Awakened and mundane alike.

Beth was one of these pioneers, and of a high rank at that.

Of course, being a champion of civilization on the wild and hostile magical frontier was not an easy job. Especially considering that the Dream Realm operated on a set of laws subtly different from the waking world, making most modern technology useless here.

But human intelligence prevailed.

'Electricity before the end of the year?'

Sunny blinked a couple of times, trying to imagine what Bastion, and other human cities in the Dream Realm, would look like if something like that truly happened.

What would they look like in ten years?

He wasn't sure he could guess.

Well, if anyone could fulfill such a promise, it was Beth. Professor Obel's last disciple…

Chapter-1596: Wind of Change

The sun had risen above the horizon, bathing Bastion in warm radiance. The morning was already in full swing, and so, Teacher Julius finally had to go.

"Goodness gracious, look at the time!"

He coughed, then looked at Beth with a smile.

"I am sorry, young lady, but this old man has to leave. I promised to meet a former colleague of mine, Master Rock. Now that he left the Academy to pick up his mace, it's tough for us to cross paths. If I miss him today…"

Beth shook her head.

"Don't worry, Professor. I'm meeting someone else, as well."

Soon, the elderly Awakened left. Beth continued to sip her hot chocolate, her weary gaze fixed on the beautiful white castle in the distance. Sunny, meanwhile, remained behind the reception desk, idly studying the latest issue of the Monster Almanach — an annual publication containing information about all the Nightmare Creatures humans had encountered in the last year.

His interest in these abominations was not at all theoretical. Powerful Memories demanded exceptional materials to be created, after all, and most of those materials came from the carcassess of slain abominations. Granted, a nobody like him rarely received an opportunity to trade for truly valuable trophies that Awakened brought back.

Especially here in Bastion, where the enchanters of Valor kept the best materials for their own use.

Still, if he knew where to search, he could hunt the suitable Nightmare Creatures himself.

'Instructor Rock, huh…'

Sunny couldn't remember when he last saw the giant man. It was strange to know that one of his first instructors had not only returned to the battlefield, but also Ascended at some point in time.

The news of the Sovereigns having conquered the Fourth Nightmare and the existence of the Dream Gates had truly invigorated humanity. With a vast and perilous frontier to conquer and make safe for the settlers, countless people had found new motivation to fight. Many of those less powerful were also burning with passion, wishing to help out however they could.

Some simply dreamed of forging a better life for themselves in the new world.

In any case, winds of change were blowing both over the dying waking world, and over the Dream Realm, which was killing it.

'I wish him luck.'

At that time, the Silver Bell rang again, and new customers entered the Emporium. Sunny rose from his seat to welcome them.

It was a young couple, both dressed in the kind of clothes Awakened usually wore outside of battle. Armor-type Memories often had layers, and those layers could usually be summoned and dismissed independently. So, many Awakened simply dismissed the heavier elements of their armor and walked around in the base layer, which could look like anything.

In fact, it often ended up looking peculiar at best, and bizarre at worst. Strangely enough, the latest trend in the fashion world was to imitate this unconventional style, which was why many idols and public figures were sporting strange combinations of bespoke gambeson jackets, linen trousers, tunics, bodysuits, and kimonos these days.

However, the couple was not trying to be fashionable. Both the

young woman and the young man were seasoned Awakened warriors, which anyone who knew anything about the world could see at first glance.

There were a lot of people like them after Antarctica, all easily recognizable by the hint of icy coldness left forever in the depths of their eyes.

The young woman was petite, with mousy hair and an unassuming face. Her gaze, however, was calm and confident. The young man had unruly hair and mischievous eyes, a light smile never leaving his lips. The quiet seriousness of the woman did not fit well with the carefree attitude of the man, and yet, they looked oddly harmonious together.

The young man looked at Sunny and seemed disappointed for a moment.

"Oh! It's you, senior. Uh… where's that cute little assistant of yours?"

Sunny tilted his head a little.

"She's in the kitchen."

At the same time, the young woman glanced at her companion.

"Why are you asking?"

The young man laughed.

"No reason, no reason! Gods, Kim, give your husband some credit… I was just surprised to see Master Sunless welcoming us personally, that's all…"

The couple were, of course, Kim and Luster — Sunny's former subordinates.

The government had taken good care of the veterans of the Evacuation Army, so Luster was now as good as new despite having been gruesomely injured in Falcon Scott. Kim was doing well, too. Due to her unique Aspect, the unassuming young woman was in high demand, being treated as a precious asset by the government.

The two of them had married not long after the Southern Campaign was over. Sunny was still bewildered by that fact, but also happy for them.

"Kim! Luster!"

Beth waved at the young couple, and they joined her at the table. Sunny walked over to receive their order, then retreated into the kitchen.

'What a strange combination…'

Kim had ordered waffles, while Luster had ordered pancakes. Beth, who seemed to have worked up an appetite, joined Kim in deciding on the waffles, as well… the odd thing, though, was that they requested a bottle of hard liquor, too.

Shaking his head, Sunny looked at Aiko and said:

"Aiko… get the good stuff from the top shelf."

She put the abacus away and looked at him darkly. His assistant was of very small stature, so it might have seemed like Sunny was bullying her by demanding the petite girl to get something from all the way on the topmost shelf.

However, after glaring at him for a moment, Aiko simply floated to the ceiling, got the bottle of the expensive whiskey, and presented it to Sunny. That was her Aspect — the Dormant Ability allowed Aiko to move objects, while the Awakened Ability allowed her to move herself.

"Thank you kindly."

Taking the bottle, Sunny picked up three glasses and went to deliver the whiskey to the esteemed guests.

Chapter-1597: Tragedy of Imperfection

Pancakes and waffles.

The two were almost identical, but also infinitely different, like two sides of the same coin. Just like both the gods and the Chaos Creatures were born from the everlasting Void, both pancakes and waffles were made from the same ingredients. However, the end result was not the same.

Perhaps there was a deep philosophical lesson to be learned from how two things made from the same ingredients could end up so vastly different, but Sunny did not particularly care.

He did, however, care about waffles and pancakes.

It wasn't hard to make either, but there was endless depth in the deceiving simplicity of these staple breakfast foods. Making pancakes was both an art and a kind of science. Waffles were even more elusive.

Even with Sunny's potent Transcendent mind and perfect physical coordination, it took him a long time to master the challenging art of making them. Still, his ultimate goal — a perfect pancake and a perfect waffle — were still out of reach.

And doomed to stay forever out of reach, because imperfection was one of the governing laws of existence.

It was… tragic.

'Perfection might not exist, but I've gotten damn close to it…'

Every cook had their own approach, but as far as Sunny was

concerned, the secret of a near-perfect waffle was letting the batter rest in the icebox for exactly one night. Which was why he had prepared it in advance yesterday.

For pancakes, though, he preferred to use fresh batter. Not wishing to make the guests wait, he manifested his shadow as an avatar and went about preparing both at the same time.

While his avatar was busy with the waffles, Sunny used his original body to make the pancakes.

The process was both simple and intricately complex.

First, he broke and separated the eggs, then poured the yolks and the whites into separate bowls. He then carefully blended milk and melted butter into the yolks while whisking the whole thing. At the Same time, Sunny manifested a pair of shadow hands to whisk the whites, using a bit of his Transcendent strength and speed to hasten the process.

Finally, he combined baking soda with vinegar and mixed that with flour, sugar, and salt.

Baking powder would have worked, as well, but it was currently in short supply in Bastion. So, soda and vinegar were going to have to do…

Aiko glanced at him — both of him, with all his six arms — shook her head, and returned to her work.

Now came the most important part. As soon as the whites were beaten to have stiff peaks, Sunny carefully combined the flour mix, the yolk mix, and the whipped whites together, creating batter.

This was where most wars were fought among the pancake enthusiasts. Some swore on lumpy batter, some considered anything except a perfectly smooth blend heretical. There were various factions in between the two extremist camps, too.

Sunny himself was a moderate, standing by a precise and immaculate balance between smoothness and lumpiness, which he had painstakingly discovered after countless attempts. Most things

worked best in moderation, after all.

When the batter was ready, he put a pan on the fire and waited for it to grow hot, while simultaneously letting the batter rest a bit. Then, he used a large spoon to pour a portion of the batter into the pan, watching with satisfaction as it formed into a neat circle.

The rest was just a matter of skill. Sunny waited until bubbles broke on the surface of the pancake, then flipped it with one smooth, precise motion. Years of sword practice helped him perform the flip in the most efficient and spectacular manner.

'One serving of transcendent pancakes coming right up...'

Soon, both the pancakes and the waffles were ready. For the final step, Sunny places a scoop of vanilla ice cream on each serving of the waffles, adding freshly cut strawberries on top.

As for the pancakes…

Sunny took a deep breath.

Ancient texts mentioned that pancakes were ritually served with something called maple syrup. However, such a thing did not exist in the world anymore, and the ancient tradition could not be maintained. There were a few substitutes, sure — especially here in Bastion, which was famous for its forests.

But the most popular one… he grimaced.

Shaking his head, Sunny put butter on the pancakes, then retrieved a glass jar from the cupboard with a shaking hand. Finally, he poured some… s—some... some honey on top.

'Disgusting. Gods! I just don't understand people…'

Hiding his discomfort behind a polite expression, he picked up all three plates, dismissed the avatar, and went to serve breakfast to the guests.

"Aiko, make two coffees…"

Beth, Kim, and Luster grew lively at the sight of the pancakes and waffles he had cooked up. Sunny took a step back and secretly watched them take their first bites. He made an effort to hide his pride.

Kim's eyes widened a little.

"These… these waffles have no vulnerabilities…"

He smirked subtly.

'Of course, they don't. These waffles were made by a Saint!'

Soon, Aiko came out of the kitchen with two cups of coffee. She placed them in front of Luster and Kim and walked away.

At that point, Sunny noticed that the bottle of whiskey he had brought out earlier was still untouched. As he contemplated why the three survivors of the Antarctic Center ordered hard liquor early in the morning, Beth turned and waved at him.

"Oh… can we get two more glasses, actually? We are waiting for someone."

Sunny lingered for a moment, then nodded and turned around to walk to the kitchen. As he did, he noticed that Aiko was still loitering near the entrance, for some reason.

"What are you doing?"

The petite girl flinched, then glanced at him and touched her hair nervously.

"W—what? Nothing…"

Just then, the Silver Bell rang once more, and a new customer walked in from the street, bringing with him the smell of verdant leaves.

It was a gallant man wearing a suit of enchanted armor. His reserved, but pleasant smile possessed a hint of warmth to it, which made his already handsome face even more attractive.

The man was followed by an Echo that resembled a monstrous hound, its fur as black as night.

Aiko suddenly straightened and met the new customer with a bright smile.

"Master Quentin! Welcome. Uh… the weather is very fine this morning, isn't it?"

Chapter-1598: Present Problems

Indeed, the gallant man was none other than Quentin, the healer and melee specialist of Sunny's old cohort of Irregulars.

Quentin's soul had been swallowed by the Call when he lost consciousness during the siege of Falcon Scott. As a result, he was pronounced missing in action by Army Command… but no one had any illusions. Everyone, including Sunny, had thought him dead.

However, the gallant healer proved everyone wrong. Somehow, he had not only managed to reach a suitable Seed of Nightmare in the hellish white desert without succumbing to its many perils, but also conquered that Nightmare alone.

There were a few people among the members of the Evacuation Army who had managed a similar feat, but still, Quentin's return could only be described with one word.

A miracle.

Sunny did not like that word too much, though. It detracted from Quentin's own effort, resolve, and incredible determination to survive. He was a man who had once clawed his way out of a cocoon made by an abominable spider, after all, while being digested alive. So, perhaps Sunny should have given him more credit.

In any case, Quentin had survived. His physical body had long been destroyed by the time he Ascended, so the Spell created a new one for him, sending it to the Citadel where he was anchored at that time.

Sunny had only learned about it a few years after becoming a Saint. Knowing that the gallant healer was alive brought him a bit of solace.

Before, he was under the impression that most of his soldiers had perished. Now, he knew that only a half of them had… which was

better, somewhat.

Maintaining a facade of polite indifference, Sunny silently pushed Aiko into the kitchen and showed Quentin to the table where Beth, Kim, and Luster were waiting. They met the healer warmly.

"Master Quentin, good morning!"

"Hey, Quentin!"

"Well, if it isn't Mr. Big Shot Ascended…"

Quentin smiled in embarrassment and took a seat.

Sunny followed Aiko into the kitchen, ignored her glare, and retrieved the additional glasses.

'Strange…'

He had opened his shop in Bastion because that was where most of the people he knew were. There were not that many good restaurants here, yet, and certainly very few run by a Master. Not to mention the Memory side of the business. Therefore, it was inevitable that he would run into an old acquaintance or two sooner or later.

Since his services were top-notch, the Brilliant Emporium gained many customers through word of mouth. Those old acquaintances recommended the new place to people in their circle, so it wasn't that odd to meet someone Sunny had known, on occasion.

Plus, many of the people he had known were also people Aiko knew.

Still, it was strange for an impromptu meeting between the survivors of the Antarctic Center to happen in his cafe all of a sudden.

If it had happened before, Sunny would have thought that [Fated] was pulling the strings of fate behind the curtains.

But he was free of such concerns now. Coincidences were nothing more than coincidences, and they did happen.

'Free…'

Sunny smiled neutrally as he placed the glass in front of Quentin.

"Would you like something to eat?"

The healer made an order, and Sunny left. As he was walking away, he saw Kim pouring the whiskey into the glasses. The sound of laughter disappeared, and the smiles disappeared, as well.

The four of them remained silent for a few moments, their faces solemn. Then, they gulped the bitter liquor down.

The fifth glass of whiskey remained standing on the table, untouched.

Sunny had an idea of what his customers were going to talk about, so he dove into the kitchen, not wanting to listen.

Aiko was there, waiting for him with a dismayed expression. She whispered angrily:

"Why did you push me away! Boss… listen… I can serve that dreamy… uh… serve Master Quentin and his friends myself. You just rest…"

Then, she noticed something on his face and grew silent.

A couple moments later, Aiko sighed.

"You are being strange again."

Sunny glanced at her impassively, then said with a shrug:

"Those guys are from the First Evacuation Army, and they are here for a reason. Leave them be."

She coughed awkwardly.

"Oh. I keep forgetting that you were in Antarctica, as well. Sorry…"

Sunny did not make a secret of the fact that he had gone through the Southern Campaign — without going into details, of course. That was because the situation there had been extremely chaotic, and many people ended up being forced to challenge Nightmares with no

warning. Few managed to survive them alone, like Quentin, though.

Still, it was easy to explain where an absolutely unknown Master had popped out from by simply saying something like "Oh, I sort of stumbled into a Nightmare in Antarctica". That was also a perfect conversation killer, dissuading people from asking further questions.

In short, it was very convenient.

Sunny patted Aiko on the shoulder and went to cook Quentin's order.

"Get ready. The breakfast crowd will arrive soon."

He cooked another omelette, brewed some coffee, and delivered both to the gallant healer.

Retreating to the reception desk, Sunny picked up the Monster Almanac and continued to read.

He could not help but catch bits and pieces of the conversation his former soldiers were having.

After the initial solemn atmosphere, the mood at their table gradually turned lighter. They joked, laughed, and shared news about themselves.

Listening to the sound of their laughter, Sunny remained silent.

At some point, though, his expression changed slightly.

Quentin was talking at the moment, his pleasant voice tinged with a complicated emotion:

"Oh… I heard something strange a few days ago, by the way."

Luster raised an eyebrow.

"Good strange or bad strange?"

The healer shrugged hesitantly.

"I'm not sure. You see… that thing. The Winter Beast. Apparently, it's gone."

Kim and Beth looked at him sharply, their eyes turning colder.

"Gone? What do you mean, gone?"

Quentin shook his head.

"It seemed like someone… or rather, something… killed it. You know how hard it is to catch glimpses of the Southern Quadrant, but apparently, the evidence suggests that it was killed years ago. We just didn't know."

A long silence settled over the table.

Then, Kim poured the remaining whiskey into their glasses and raised hers.

A pale smile appeared on her face.

"Good. That's good, then…"

Turning the page, Sunny sighed subtly.

Of course, he knew that the Winter Beast was gone.

He was the one who had killed it, after all, ripping the wretched thing apart with his own two hands.

Well, it was in the past now.

Right now, he was running low on coffee beans and a bunch of other ingredients. Worse than that, his Memory business was not doing that well.

This was the kind of problems Sunny was facing in the present.

Chapter-1599: Delivery

The four survivors of the Antarctic Center finished their meal. As a good host, Sunny saw them off, then remained on the porch for a few moments, looking as they walked away.

However, he did not have time to waste.

By then, there were several other customers waiting to be served, so he sent Aiko to the dining hall and hid himself in the kitchen. Manifesting a second body, Sunny concentrated on preparing food.

Mornings were a busy time in the Brilliant Emporium, but the two of them were managing fine. Sunny had two bodies and could manifest as many hands as he needed, while Aiko was a perfect waitress, simply floating the dishes to the tables with her telekinesis.

After an hour or two, the breakfast crowd dwindled and gradually cleared out, leaving the interior of the Marvelous Mimic empty once again. Sunny washed his hands and leaned back on the Shadow Chair, while Aiko was counting the money they made.

With the increase in human population of the Sword Domain, it was not convenient to simply use soul shards as currency anymore. Credits, meanwhile, were a purely digital currency… so, the Great Clans had recently started minting their own coins. Each coin contained a small amount of essence, and their value was supported by the shard treasuries each clan possessed.

Sunny did not really care about the matters of economy, but Aiko was all about it, constantly pestering him to think about converting the Brilliant Emporium into a bank and making his money make money by lending it out to less affluent people in Bastion. The possibility of capitalizing on the first-mover advantage in a new world almost made her drool.

That said, the petite girl was not really serious about these fanciful dreams, since she understood that growing too big would land them in the steel embrace of Valor, as well.

In any case…

Sunny spun a heavy silver coin between his fingers, studying it with a distant expression. One side of the coin had a number on it, while the other was embossed with the image of a sword piercing an anvil. He could feel a minuscule amount of soul essence contained in the silver, ensuring its authenticity.

This essence could also be directly absorbed, which was why many Awakened carried a few coins with them at all times, just in case they found themselves in dire straits.

'...The coins my Mimic makes are much more valuable.'

Granted, the Marvelous Mimic had few opportunities to consume someone here in Bastion, so there were not a lot of these coins around.

And speaking of the Marvelous Mimic…

Sunny shifted when he felt the Brilliant Emporium tremble slightly. It was as if the shapeshifting Shadow was shivering in fright.

'Ah.'

"Boss! Boss! They're here!"

Aiko hurriedly dashed toward the kitchen and hid behind the door, peeking from behind it with a concerned expression.

Sunny sighed, then stood up and headed toward the door.

'It's time, then.'

Walking outside, he mentally prepared himself.

Out there, on the front lawn of the Brilliant Emporium… an adorable wolf pup was sitting, staring at him with shining eyes and wagging

his tail excitedly.

The little wolf was undeniably cute. However, the problem was that he was also the size of a bull.

Sunny looked at the lawn, which had been torn by the wolf pup's claws, and grimaced.

"Little Ling… we talked about it. Human form, remember?"

The puppy tilted his head in confusion, his ears flopping side-to-side. Then, his body shimmered subtly.

Sunny averted his eyes.

In the next moment, there was the sound of rushing air, and a man's voice resounded from a bit further down the street:

"Ling Ling! Summon your clothes!"

A childish voice answered a moment later:

"Buuuut… daddy…"

"Right now!"

Sunny waited for a bit, then looked down.

The wolf pup was gone, and there was an equally adorable four-year-old boy standing in front of him, dressed in a simple tunic. Further down the street, a good-looking young man was pushing a sizable cart toward the Emporium, beads of sweat glistening on his forehead.

He gave Sunny a friendly smile.

"Master Sunless! Sorry if we are a bit late."

Sunny wanted to answer, but at that moment, the little boy smiled brightly and shouted:

"Uncle!"

With that, he pounced at Sunny and hugged him.

Sunny gasped, turning a bit pale, and was pushed back a couple steps. His bones groaned.

"Ah… ouch…"

The strange pair were from the Beast Farm — which was where Sunny purchased most of the fresh ingredients used in the Brilliant Emporium. They were making a delivery.

…Of course, they were also Effie's husband and child.

The huntress swore that she named her son "Ling" in honor of the leader of her first cohort, but Sunny had his doubts. In any case, Little Ling was a unique existence. He had been born in the void at the heart of Ariel's Tomb, and therefore treated as a challenger when the Nightmare was conquered.

So, Little Ling had become a Transcendent as an infant. The child Saint was now a darling of humanity, famous across both worlds.

The good-looking young man, meanwhile, was the nameless Awakened Sunny had once welcomed back from the First Nightmare. That guy was not exactly famous, but definitely infamous. Many people treated him with a peculiar mix of envy, admiration… and fearful sympathy.

After all, being married to one Saint and a father to another was not for the faint of heart!

Especially considering the fact that his wife was none other than Raised by Wolves, and that it had taken Little Ling a while to start learning how to control his Transcendent strength.

Depending on one's point of view, that guy could either be called the luckiest or the unluckiest person in the world.

'Poor bastard…'

Little Ling was indeed getting better at controlling his strength, but that did not mean that he was good at it.

Suppressing a groan of pain, Sunny struggled to inhale and cautiously

patted the adorable boy on the head.

"Little Ling… dear… uncle can't breathe…"

Chapter-1600: Beast Farm

Sunny had experienced a lot of bizarre things in his life, but the nameless guy really took the cake.

It must have been one hell of a conversation when Effie came back from a routine mission as a Saint, with a baby in tow despite only being in the third month of her pregnancy, saying that the baby… was somehow also a Saint.

Sunny did not even want to imagine.

In any case, Effie and the nameless guy seemed to have worked things out in the end. In fact, their relationship was strangely picturesque and idyllic. Their son was growing up happily, too, bathed in endless care and affection.

His mom was now one of the five Transcendent powerhouses of the government, as well as one of the most well-known and beloved protectors of humanity. His dad, meanwhile, had gone into the Dream Realm on the winter solstice, a month after the cohort returned from the Tomb of Ariel, and became an Awakened. He possessed a Utility Aspect having to do with mending, restoration, and cultivation...

as well as golden hands.

Now, the nameless guy was managing a large farm that he and Effie had established on the beautiful meadow contained within her Supreme Memory. That farm was the source of many ingredients Sunny used in the Brilliant Emporium, so he received visits from the nameless farmer often.

Which was why the Marvelous Mimic was afraid of Little Ling. The cute boy possessed an endless amount of enthusiasm, like all children did, and the power of a Transcendent being. Therefore, he was

nothing short of a walking disaster for furniture, appliances, and even buildings.

Sunny did not know how Effie's house was still standing, but the Mimic had suffered greatly despite being a powerful devil.

…Sunny had suffered greatly, too.

As he extricated himself from Little Ling's embrace, thanking Bone Weave for keeping his ribs intact, Sunny shook his head in dejection.

'Well, it's my own fault.'

He just couldn't resist the adorable brat, so every time they visited, Sunny treated him to something tasty, like hot chocolate, waffles, or ice cream.

Who knew that a child's fondness could be bought that easily? Therefore, Sunny didn't have anyone but himself to blame for being the target of Little Ling's affection.

As soon as the little boy let go, he looked at Sunny with huge eyes and smiled bashfully.

"...Auntie Aiko?"

'Sorry, Aiko.'

Sunny smiled and pointed behind himself.

"Oh, she's in the kitchen."

His only saving grace was that Aiko seemed to be the energetic puppy's favorite. So, he heartlessly hid behind the petite girl every time the duo arrived.

"Yay!"

Little Ling disappeared behind the door. A moment later, the Marvelous Mimic seemed to shake a little.

The nameless guy had brought his large cart over, by that point.

Sunny looked at him and nodded politely.

"Nice to see you, Ling's Dad. How is it today?"

Ling's Dad panted for a few moments, then grinned.

"Great! We were finally able to cultivate a strip of raspberries, in addition to what we already grow in the garden. The fields are taking well to the new fertilizer, too. Oh, and we are thinking of procuring more cattle, considering how high the demand for fresh milk has been lately."

He pointed to the cart.

"Plus, with all the enchanted items you made for us, my life has become much easier. So, this time, I was able to bring everything on the list. Milk, eggs, tomatoes, flour…"

He listed all the things in the cart, leaving Sunny to contemplate for a few moments.

'That's good. I won't have to search for many substitutes in the waking world. Still, Bastion is still far away from being self-sufficient, so there is no choice but to go…'

Indeed, although humanity's presence in the Dream Realm had expanded dramatically, they were still dependent on the waking world for countless things. As far as Sunny was concerned, things like coffee beans, chocolate, salt, and a bunch of other commodities could only be procured on the other side.

Which was a bit of a pain, considering that he had to act as a Master. So, every time Sunny wanted to go to the waking world, he had to enter the Castle and pretend to use the Gateway there.

At least he didn't need to come back through the Dream Gate. That would force him to interact with people from Valor way more often, and way more closely, than he wished to.

He nodded at Ling's Dad and offered him a hand:

"Let me help you unload everything."

As they were unloading the cart, he asked nonchalantly:

"Oh, how is your wife doing, by the way?"

Ling Dad smiled, a glint appearing in his eyes.

"Effie? She is doing great. Soul Reaper and she have just returned from suppressing a minor Gate Crisis in the Eastern Quadrant. The casualties were minimal, so everyone is celebrating…"

Sunny sighed.

As much as the situation in the Dream Realm had improved for humans, the situation in the waking world was slowly getting worse. There were more Gates, and those Gates were more powerful. Even with resource shortages being greatly relieved by the mass migration to the other world, the infrastructure was still reeling from losing Antarctica.

So, the government was busier than ever. Not only were they working to establish a firmer foothold in the rapidly changing Dream Realm, but they were also working hard to contain the growing menace of the Nightmare Spell.

Luckily, it was not only the Legacy Clans that had become much stronger after the Chain of Nightmares. Although the government did not have many Saints, their Awakened forces had grown tremendously in recent years — mostly due to many veterans of the Evacuation Army choosing to remain in service.

And the few Saints the government did have were up there with the mightiest champions of the Great Clans. Soul Reaper Jet, Raised by Wolves, and Nightingale… the three of them were worth a dozen less powerful Transcendent, if not more.

Ling's Dad straightened, wiped his brow, then almost blinded Sunny with a smile.

"Ah! Sorry, I forgot to mention… she'll be coming by in a short while."

Sunny blinked a couple times.

"She… Transcendent Athena? She'll be coming by?"

The nameless guy nodded happily.

"Yes. She had a meeting to attend in the Castle, so I just told her to meet us here..."

Sunny froze.

Chapter-1601: Esteemed Guest

Sunny froze for a moment, then smiled politely.

"Ah. In that case, it seems I'll be busy in the kitchen soon."

His face did not betray any emotions, but he was a bit rattled on the inside.

'What is up with today?'

He had wandered the Dream Realm alone for about three years after becoming a Saint, only returning to the embrace of civilization a year ago. So, the Brilliant Emporium had not been open for too long. In that time, Sunny had brushed sides with some members of the cohort, but it did not happen often.

And definitely not in any kind of meaningful way.

Which was how he preferred it. He was being contradictory in that desire, perhaps — after all, the very reason Sunny had chosen to open his shop in Bastion was because many of his old friends were here. Well… there was another reason, as well, but that was the deciding factor.

Still, while he could maintain a level of nonchalance while meeting people like Teacher Julius or the Irregulars, it was different with his former companions. Being close to them was both sweet and painful… but mostly painful. Which was why he both yearned to see them and preferred to avoid them at all costs.

Sunny knew that getting closer to the cohort members would only bring him anguish and torment. Nevertheless, he was sometimes tempted to abandon reason and ingratiate himself into their company once again.

Luckily, in the end, reason always won.

In any case…

'Calm down. You brought this on yourself, anyway.'

Not only was the Brilliant Emporium bound to attract the attention of local powerhouses eventually, but there was also Aiko.

There were less than a hundred survivors of the Forgotten Shore alive now, and she was one of them. Many of the Fire Keepers were on friendly terms with her, so they visited her place of work often.

Sadly, that did not translate into Memory sales — as the elite battle force led by Nephis, they not only had access to the best weapons and equipment the Great Clan Valor could supply them with, but also spent most of their time on calamitous battlefields, earning plenty of powerful Memories of their own.

…Kai and Effie were among Aiko's friends, too. That was how Sunny had established the partnership with the Beast Farm, in the first place.

He sighed and beckoned Little Ling's Dad.

"Please come in. I'll pour you something cold and refreshing while you wait."

The two of them carried the ingredients into the kitchen, witnessing a peculiar scene. Little Ling was giggling as he jumped around like a rabbit, reaching his small hands toward Aiko. The petite girl, meanwhile, had sought refuge at high altitude and was floating near the ceiling with a distressed expression on her face.

"Auntie! Auntie! Come down!"

She threw a resentful glance at Sunny, sighed, and glided to the floor. Catching the little boy, Aiko nimbly spun him around and then patted him on the head.

"Here, here. I'm down. How about we get you some ice cream, wolfie? Just… be a good boy!"

The rascal immediately put on a subdued expression and looked at her with his huge eyes.

His entire being expressed nothing but well-behaved obedience.

"Little Ling is a good boy."

At the sound of his solemn voice, Aiko couldn't help but smile.

"Alright. Then, let's go…"

Soon, the little boy was sitting at one of the tables and happily swinging his legs in the air. In front of him was a bowl of ice cream, adorned with freshly cut strawberries… the ice cream was disappearing with a frightening speed.

His dad, meanwhile, was drinking a glass of cold lemonade as he watched the street through the window.

Sunny was looking at the contents of his icebox, wondering if there would be anything left for other customers after Effie was done plundering his cafe.

Soon, he heard the sound of the Silver Bell ringing, and an excited yelp:

"Mommyyyy!"

Then, there was a sound akin to a torpedo hitting the hull of a warship, and the entire Marvelous Mimic shook. Dust spilled from the ceiling.

Letting out a sigh, Sunny turned around and left the kitchen.

Effie was perhaps the only person who could withstand the full force of Little Ling's excited pounce without being pushed back or reeling. She had easily caught the brat and raised him into a tight hug, laughing. The boy was hanging from his mom's tall body like a monkey.

"Hey there, dumpling. Missed me?"

"I'm not a dumpling! I'm a boy!"

"Alright, alright… but why are you so tasty?"

"Mooommy!"

As Effie pretended to bite Little Ling, he giggled happily and squirmed in her embrace. Sunny observed the scene while suppressing a smile.

Despite the flow of time, Effie had not changed at all. She was still the same tall, beautiful, and vibrant woman Sunny had met in the Dark City. Her athletic body was still brimming with boundless vigor and vitality, her perfect lean muscles rolling under the dewy olive skin.

Of course, there were changes, too. Effie had grown even more appealing, her Transcendent allure capable of bringing countless men to their knees. There was a subtle, but palpable presence about her, too… perhaps it had always been there, but now there was no mistaking it.

Wherever Effie went, the air brimmed with liveliness and energy. Everyone around her felt a certain primal intensity permeate their bodies, infusing them with stimulating, spirited force.

Such was the effect that Saint Raised by Wolves, one of the most famous and beloved warriors of humanity, had on people.

Carrying Little Ling, she walked over to where the nameless guy was sitting, hugged him with one hand, and kissed him on the cheek. Then, she looked at Aiko and grinned.

"Hey there, shorty! Gods, have you grown even tinier? I really can't… Aiko, you're so cute. Every time I see you, I just want to squeeze you and dress you up."

The petite girl frowned.

"There will be no more squeezing happening today, thank you very much."

Effie laughed.

"...That stupidly gorgeous boss of yours, as well! Ah, he's just like a porcelain doll. If I wasn't a married woman, I would have definitely tried dressing him up. Or, you know. Undressing him would be fine, too…"

Aiko's eyes widened, while Little Ling's Dad spat out his lemonade.

Effie's smile turned a little strange. She fluttered her lashes sheepishly, then coughed.

"Oh. He's standing right behind me, isn't he?"

Chapter-1602: Short, Dark, and Handsome

Effie slowly turned around, just in time to notice the unreasonably gorgeous proprietor of the Brilliant Emporium falling. Three cups of coffee that he had been carrying on a tray were flying into the air in slow motion.

It seemed that he had tripped.

Without missing a beat, the enigmatic shopkeeper regained his balance with a graceful half-step, extended his hand unhurriedly, and caught all three cups on the tray without spilling a single drop.

A moment later, he smoothly approached the table and placed the cups down, acting as if nothing had happened. Then, the nonchalant young man smiled pleasantly and gave her a respectful bow.

"Saint Athena. Welcome."

Effie found herself unable to speak for a moment.

'D—damn. So cool!'

At the same time, Sunny was nothing short of panicking on the inside.

'What the hell?! No, what the actual hell?! I mean… what the hell?!'

How could she go and say something like that?!

And right in front of her husband, too!

Did that woman have no tact?!

Glancing at Ling's Dad covertly, Sunny noticed that the young man

was looking at him apologetically. He seemed more embarrassed than anything, with no signs of anger or insecurity written on his handsome face.

It seemed that the nameless guy was used to his wife's antics… well, it made sense.

'Why wouldn't he be?'

Sunny had been teased relentlessly by Effie. What made him think that the poor bastard would have had it any easier? If anything, as her husband, he probably had it way worse…

Effie, meanwhile, smiled and said in a reserved tone:

"Oh, Master Sunless. You were here."

It stung a little. The fact Effie used his name instead of a nickname, like she did with her close friends, stung. The fact that she made an effort to act with decorum around him stung, too.

Even not being openly teased by her caused a dull ache in his heart.

But, at the same time…

Seeing her healthy and well made him happy. Being around her felt familiar and nice, too… even though he was nothing but a dull, unassuming merchant in her eyes. A passing acquaintance not deserving of a second thought, unremarkable and easily forgotten. Someone not worthy of her time, let alone attention.

In fact, it was strange for her to even remember his name.

But that was the best Sunny could hope for.

For now.

He nodded politely.

"Indeed. I took the liberty of making some coffee for you to enjoy while the food is being prepared. Aiko, you take a break and keep our esteemed guest company."

Effie was being uncharacteristically taciturn, probably because she felt uncomfortable around a stranger. She was also looking at him strangely. If Sunny did not know better, he could have even imagined that she was feeling shy.

But, surely, that was impossible.

Bowing again, Sunny turned around and fled into the kitchen.

Of course, he made sure to make his retreat seem calm and dignified.

…As he was walking away, though, he couldn't help but hear Little Ling giggling.

"Hehehe. Clothes are itchy! Can mommy undress Ling Ling, too?"

Feeling his ears burning, Sunny dove behind a door.

'Damnation!'

Right. He had to concentrate on cooking… knowing Effie's appetite, nothing less than a veritable feast would do.

Sunny did just that, manifesting an avatar and several pairs of shadow hands. Slicing, dicing, washing, roasting, boiling, simmering, stirring… he had to do a lot of things at the same time just to distract himself from thinking too much.

Thankfully, his other two avatars were busy at the moment, as well, increasing the load on his consciousness.

An idle mind was a restless mind! So, Sunny preferred being busy.

Nevertheless, he couldn't help but hear bits and pieces of the conversation happening in the dining hall.

"Shortie, is your boss single? I have someone in mind to set him up with!"

"Single? Actually, he's double… I mean, there's two of him…"

"Huh?"

"In any case, leave my boss alone! Every time you people show up, my career takes a nosedive! First in the Bright Castle, then in NQSC… I swear to the dead gods, Effie, if another of my employers decides to enlist and become a war hero after spending time with you lot, I'll take it personally!"

"Ah! Are you still angry at Kai? Actually, he asked me to pass a message to you…"

"Tell that pretty bastard to keep his messages to himself. Unless he wants to help me sue himself for unlawful termination, I don't want to hear a word from him."

"Hehe. Bastard! Bastard!"

"Ling Ling! Don't say that word!"

Sunny shook his head and let out a sigh, thinking that Aiko was being too harsh on Kai.

Actually, Effie and her were not that close. The two of them were on friendly terms and shared a deep bond as the survivors of the Forgotten Shore, sure, but back then, Aiko had lived in the Bright Castle, while Effie had been a huntress of the outer settlement. Their paths had not intersected often.

Another point of connection between them was Kai, who knew the petite girl much better from their days of paying tribute to Gunlaug. Aiko had even worked as his manager after returning to the waking world. So, when he chose to end his idol career and enlist in the military, she lost her job.

As a result, Aiko seemed to be holding a grudge.

Which was a bit sad, considering that she was one of the main reasons why Kai had ended up as a Saint in service of the government, to begin with.

Kai's life could have been safe and comfortable as an Awakened, but he had chosen to follow Sunny and the rest of the cohort into the Second Nightmare, and later joined the Southern Campaign. One of the main reasons he had done that was the shame he felt about not

having done anything to help Aiko when she was being harassed by one of Gunlaug's Pathfinders.

The bastard whom Nephis had eventually killed.

So, Kai never wanted to be powerless to help people like Aiko, and Aiko herself, ever again. That was his motivation to seek strength and continuously put himself at risk as one of the government's champions.

'What a messed-up situation.'

The web of human relationships was like that, and sometimes it seemed that people were helplessly stuck in its complicated embrace.

Sunny, on the other hand, had been forcefully freed from that web.

And yet… his situation was just as messed up.

He chuckled.

There was no salvation from the human mess anywhere.

Chapter-1603: He's a Rumor

It was not every day that a famous Saint visited the Brilliant Emporium, so Sunny went all out with cooking up a feast.

And Effie was, without a doubt, very famous.

The world had changed a lot from the day he Awakened. Back then, there had been barely a few dozen Transcendents in existence, each representing the absolute pinnacle of human tenacity and achievement. They were distant and dazzling, like living legends.

Today, though, there were more than a hundred Saints out there. They were still revered and venerated, and each of them was still an absolute elite — an exalted warrior and champion, the best of the best humanity had to offer.

But, still. Not all Saints were made equal. All of them were remarkable, but some were more remarkable than the rest.

In general, the hundred Transcendents were often divided into three loose tiers. The lowest tier — if such a description could even be applied to these legendary figures — was the largest, and mostly consisted of those Saints who had reached Transcendence after the Southern Campaign.

They were younger and less experienced, and their path to Sainthood had been a little easier than that of their predecessors. So, these undoubtedly outstanding warriors were still considered a bit weaker than the rest of the Saints.

The middle tier consisted of the few most talented representatives of the new generation, as well as of the old guard — of those seasoned veterans that had reached Transcendence before the Chain of Nightmares. Saints like Sky Tide, Summer Knight, Silent Stalker, Bloodwave, and Wake of Ruin were among them.

These powerhouses wielded fierce powers and possessed a frightening amount of experience, each towering above the rest of humanity like mythical giants.

…However, there was still someone above them.

Each of these unique individuals was a singular existence, a presence that broke all the rules. Their terrifying power could hardly be measured, and they stood apart from even the Saints, inferior only to the Sovereigns themselves. There was no word for what these people were, but everyone knew their names.

The government possessed three of these exceptional champions: Raised by Wolves, Nightingale, and Soul Reaper.

Clan Song possessed three, as well. They were Mordret, Seishan, and Beastmaster.

And lastly, Clan Valor possessed two. They were Nephis and Morgan, the Sword Sisters.

…Of course, there were Saints of equally terrible power who were completely unknown. One of them was Cassie.

The other one was Sunny.

And that was pretty much it.

So, it wasn't an exaggeration to say that a very famous Saint was currently visiting the Brilliant Emporium. Saying that she finally understood what the female Fire Keepers had been talking about when they mentioned the "eye candy cafe".

Sunny frowned subtly.

"Eye Candy Cafe? Hmm. I haven't heard of it. Do I have a new competitor?"

New shops and restaurants were popping up in Bastion almost every day, so he was not very diligent about keeping up with the competition.

'Whatever. All the more reason to make sure that Effie is satisfied with her experience in the Brilliant Emporium. Then, she can tell the Fire Keepers to stay loyal to it. Her own soldiers, as well! Although the government Awakened have fewer coins to spend, there are a lot of them…'

Eventually, he used one of his bodies to start serving the dishes.

Various side dishes, a mountain of dumplings, tender barbequed meat, black bean noodles, steamed buns, spring rolls, red rice cakes, and perfectly cooked rice… he had really outdone himself this time.

Panting, Sunny wiped his hands on the apron and smiled pridefully.

Back in the dining hall, Effie had already demolished half of what he had cooked and let out a satisfied sigh.

"Ah! This is great!"

Then, she gave his avatar thumbs up and added:

"Can I get another one of everything?"

Sunny's smile wavered.

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After Effie was done with her meal, she stayed for a while, catching up with Aiko. They had invited Sunny to join them, but he politely refused and returned to the reception desk, pretending to read the Monster Almanac.

Therefore, he accidentally heard Effie sharing some information about the meeting she had attended in the Castle.

"It's about the winter solstice, of course. Which is today. By tomorrow, many Sleepers from the waking world would be sent into the Dream Realm, scattered all across its territory. With how many humans are here now, most will find their way to the nearest settlement without much problem. The rest will be picked up by the patrols we've jointly established. Well… apart from those who are unlucky."

She grew quiet for a moment, and then added in a somber tone:

"Of course, there very well may be poor bastards like us two. Since not all regions of the Dream Realm have human presence, they can be lost. No one wants the Forgotten Shore to be repeated, so this time, there is an initiative to widen the search area. Valor is even sending a team into a Death Zone."

Aiko frowned.

"Let me guess who is going to draw the short straw. They're going to send Changing Star, aren't they?"

Effie sighed.

"Yeah. My poor Princess can't catch a break. Well, of course, it's all a ruse. The real reason they are sending her there..."

She lowered her voice:

"...is the Lord of Shadows."

Sunny turned the page of the Monster Almanac, his face remaining perfectly neutral.

Aiko, meanwhile, raised an eyebrow.

"Lord of Shadows? Who is that?"

Effie gently caressed Little Ling's head. The boy was resting his head on her lap, fast asleep. His dad, meanwhile, simply listened to their conversation while sipping coffee with a smile on his face.

The huntress shrugged.

"He's just a rumor… ah, but since Valor is taking action, I guess he's not, after all. In any case, there has been a lot of talk about a mysterious Saint appearing in the Death Zone between the Sword Domain and the Song Domain not too long ago. If he really exists, and has been able to survive there alone for so long… then he is immensely powerful.

Of course, both Domains would want to obtain his allegiance."

She hesitated for a moment, then added darkly:

"Or, if that is not possible, to make sure that no one else gets him. I guess they are sending Nephis to test the waters."

Shaking her head, Effie remained silent for a few moments, and then laughed.

"Can you imagine? I mean, has Anvil lost it, or what? Don't get me wrong, I love Princess… but really, she is probably the worst person in the world to use as a negotiator…"

Sunny couldn't help but agree.

Of course, what Effie did not know was that the person Nephis was supposed to negotiate with was sitting just a few meters away, having just served her a delicious dinner.

Chapter-1604: Brave New World

'So, they are finally starting to move…'

Sunny let out a quiet sigh. Things were progressing according to his calculations, but at the same time, he felt that it was sometimes unpleasant to be right.

Many things had changed since Antarctica. But many things were also the same.

The balance of power was entirely different, for example.

Sunny had been born at the time when the three Great Clans were in charge of humanity, so for the longest time, he simply assumed that that was the natural order of things. But actually, although some Legacy Clans had always been more prominent than the others, the three great families — Valor, Song, and Night — only rose to their exalted status shortly before he was born.

And now, the status quo had changed again. Even though there were still nominally three Great Clans, in practice, only two remained. The House of Night had lost its competitive edge for a multitude of reasons, the main being that it lacked a Sovereign.

Without a Sovereign, the masters of the Stormsea could not bring millions of mundane humans into their area of influence and develop their Citadels into prosperous cities. They could not keep up with the exploding number of Awakened, Masters, and Saints the other two Great Clans now commanded, either.

In short, the House of Night had been relegated to the role of a supporting player in the great game between Valor and Song.

The role of the government was not the same, either. Now that the Sovereigns had revealed themselves and the exodus of humanity from

the waking world had quietly begun, the writing was on the wall. As the force mainly responsible for maintaining the cradle of humanity, the government had no choice but to become obsolete.

Perhaps it was not going to happen in a decade, or even several decades, but their days were numbered. Unless the government changed, that was.

And so, it was changing, slowly developing its presence in the Dream Realm. Strangely enough, despite the bleak future, the government's power had actually grown in recent years. Although there were not a lot of Saints in its employ, three of those Saints belonged to the highest tier of Transcendents. There were countless Awakened and a large number of Masters remaining loyal to the army, as well.

So, the government had actually shortened the gap and was now almost as powerful as the House of Night.

It was nowhere near the two nascent kingdoms of the Dream Realm, though.

And those kingdoms — Sword Domain, and Song Domain — had changed the least.

The war between the two Great Clans was not being fought in the open, but it had never ended. The only thing preventing it from progressing to direct conflict was that the two Domains did not share a physical border.

Yet.

But, in fact, the territories of Song and Valor were dangerously close to each other. It was just that they were separated by a perilously dangerous Death Zone. That Death Zone was doomed to become the first battlefield of the inevitable open war between the two Dream Kingdoms.

...It was also where Sunny had established his Citadel, right in the middle of this exceedingly important strategic region. And where his third avatar was currently hunting down anything stupid enough to challenge his rule.

His thinking was simple…

He had to put himself in an advantageous position for when the war inevitably started.

Because after three years of wandering the Dream Realm alone and slowly losing his mind, he realized that he didn't want to observe the end of the world, and the birth of a new one, from the sidelines.

He wanted to be right in the middle of everything, shaping the outcome to fit his will, and achieving his goals in the process.

Well, anyway…

That was the third avatar's problem. The second avatar was keeping an eye on Rain and cautiously exploring the hidden side of Ravenheart.

This Sunny, meanwhile, was simply running a shop.

And occasionally feeding gluttonous Saints.

"Hey there, Master Sunless. Can I ask you a question?"

Sunny looked away from his book and turned to Effie.

"You certainly can, Saint Athena."

Effie hesitated for a moment, then smiled mischievously.

"Is Sunless really your name? You know, I'm not saying that it sounds like something an eighth-grader would call himself… but I'm also not not saying that…"

He stared at her with a polite expression.

"...Didn't you name your son Dumpling?"

Effie flinched.

"W—what? No! Ling, his name is Ling! It's the name that belonged to a dear friend of mine!"

Sunny smiled and turned back to his book.

"My mom, you see, had a poetic soul."

He hesitated for a moment, and then added nonchalantly:

"Also, I never attended school. So I wouldn't even know what an eighth-grader would call himself…"

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Effie, Little Ling, and Little Ling's dad eventually went on their way, leaving a mountain of dirty dishes behind. Sunny used his avatar to wash them while resting on the porch and listening to the lively sounds of Bastion.

Although his shadow sense could reach far and wide, he didn't dare use it right under Anvil's nose. The King of Swords possessed unrivaled authority within his Domain, after all, and few things escaped his gaze.

Chances were, he would sense someone exploring his capital through unseen means. So, Sunny kept to himself.

Soon, the midday crowd arrived, and he spent a couple of hours in the kitchen cooking various lunches. That crowd disappeared, as well, leaving the Brilliant Emporium empty.

Sunny was drowning in a strange melancholy after meeting Effie. The time she had spent in his restaurant had felt very uplifting, but now that she was gone, only wistfulness remained.

It was his birthday, as well. But she didn't remember. No one did. Honestly, even he had almost forgotten about it himself.

What was the big deal, anyway?

Suppressing a sigh, Sunny closed his eyes and concentrated on his other avatars. That was another advantage of existing in several places simultaneously — he was almost never bored.

'So, Nephis is coming…'

It was not unexpected, but happened sooner than he had thought. How long would it take her to find the Nameless Temple? Knowing Neph... two weeks, at most?

So, he had two weeks to mentally prepare himself.

That was probably enough time.

'Rain needs better arrows, too...'

Time passed swiftly while he contemplated various matters.

Then, a new customer arrived.

This one, however, was not here for a meal, but rather for a Memory.

Chapter-1605: Memory Boutique

The Silver Bell rang once more, and a new customer walked in. Sunny was idly wondering what they would order when he noticed who it was. A moment later, his eyes glistened with professional interest.

It was a young woman wearing light armor and a white cape… an Awakened. Her elegant beauty and golden hair were lovely, but her expression was cold and composed, creating an uninviting impression.

Sunny did not really care about what she looked like, though. The aloof Awakened was important because she was one of his clients, and had come to retrieve a Memory. More than that, she was a Legacy. Which meant a hefty commission and a great boost to the Brilliant Emporium's reputation.

Plus, she was a passing acquaintance from Sunny's former life. Even though they had only met a few times, hers was still a familiar face.

He smiled and bowed politely.

"Awakened Telle. Welcome."

The young woman glanced at him sternly and nodded.

"Master Sunless. I'll be leaving Bastion soon, so I wanted to check on your progress. It would be convenient if you procure a suitable Memory before I depart."

He couldn't help but widen his smile a little.

"It is good that you decided to pay the Brilliant Emporium a visit, my

lady. In fact, I have just recently acquired something that might be of interest to you."

Sunny did not make a big secret of the fact that he could craft Memories, but he was hiding the extent of his abilities. So, for the more demanding commissions, he pretended to be a mere merchant. Very few people knew what he was really capable of.

For most, it seemed like he simply possessed a network of connections that allowed him to find and purchase suitable Memories in a timely fashion.

Sunny signaled Aiko to hold down the fort and invited Awakened Telle to follow him downstairs. Passing through an ornate wooden door, they descended a set of stairs and entered the spacious basement of the Marvelous Mimic.

There, a large chamber was illuminated by the soft light of enchanted lanterns. The furnishing was luxurious, but tasteful, exuding elegance and class. Various Memories were displayed in glass cases that were attached to the walls, sharp steel glinting on dark velvet. No sound from the upper floor reached this silent place, creating a solemn atmosphere.

…In short, Sunny had nothing to do with designing how the Memory Boutique looked. It was all Aiko's work.

The petite girl possessed much more knowledge on how to actually sell Memories, both because she had been close to Stev, the caretaker of the Bright Castle's arsenal, and because she had run the actual operation of Sunny's Brilliant Emporium in the past. Plus, she was generally savvy when it came to business.

Aiko had explained her rationale well to make Sunny sign off on all these expensive furnishings.

There were much more Awakened now, but good Memories were still quite expensive. In that sense, they were much closer to luxury goods than to common tools. Therefore, a Memory shop had to cater to a luxurious clientele in order to seem reputable. The classier it looked, the more inclined affluent clients would feel about spending their

coins here.

Although Aiko had complained that the Brilliant Emporium had only sold one Memory in the last two months, it was actually not that bad of a result. In fact, Sunny only had to sell a Memory once in a while to keep the business afloat… selling one every month, meanwhile, would be more than enough to turn a large profit.

Right now, the main problem he faced was not weaving Memories, but actually crafting them. Since Sunny did not want to reveal his secrets, he was reluctant to partner up with external specialists. Therefore, he did everything alone, playing the role of a blacksmith, jeweler, tanner, tailor, carpenter, and so on himself.

He was surprisingly good at it… well, actually, it was not very surprising.

Sunny had learned the basics of craftsmanship a long time ago. Every Awakened knew how to survive in the wilderness, which included maintaining their equipment, constructing shelter, sewing up wounds, and many other things. Additionally, he deepened his knowledge of all kinds of crafting while learning to weave Memories.

That knowledge was then put to the test when he lost access to the Nightmare Spell and had to survive in the remote regions of the Dream Realm alone for three years.

Most importantly, though… Sunny was a weaver. His ability to craft weaves of essence strings made all other forms of craftsmanship seem accessible. He also had a golden touch due to consuming Weaver's phalanx.

Lastly, he was a Transcendent. His dexterity, physical coordination, and precision were unrivaled, his senses were vastly superior to those of mundane humans, and his mental acumen was far beyond the norm.

In short, Sunny had put a lot of effort into mastering his trade, and was confident that he would not lose to the famed forgemasters of Clan Valor when it came to the quality of his craftsmanship.

Although… he was somewhat envious of all the tools and resources they had access to.

Awakened Telle could not see it, but there was more than one chamber in the basement of the Marvelous Mimic. Sunny also had an expansive workshop hidden behind the boutique, containing everything he used to do work, from a forge and a kiln to a pottery wheel and a sewing machine.

There was also a large storage room where various materials, mostly sourced from the carcasses of Nightmare Creatures, were kept.

It had not been easy to arrange a proper workshop in the basement of the Marvelous Mimic, let alone an opulent boutique. The interior of the Shadow was somewhat of a separate dimension, after all, and although Sunny had managed to alter the weave of the original Covetous Coffer to make it capable of containing living things, it wasn't really suited for it.

Above ground, the problem was easily solved by having the Marvelous Mimic manifest windows, which could let in air and light. Below ground, though, things were a bit tricky.

In the end, Sunny had to create enchanted lanterns for illumination and heat plates for warmth. The air, meanwhile, was supplied by inferior copies of the Quintessence Pearl placed strategically here and there. The Marvelous Mimic supplied the essence needed to keep these enchanted items working itself.

That arrangement had the side effect of turning the interior of the Marvelous Mimic into an isolated environment that could sustain human life... or any kind of life, really... even if the Shadow was buried deep underground or fell to the bottom of the ocean. Even drowning in a volcano was not going to present much of a problem.

But that was beside the point. Sunny had no intentions of drowning in volcanoes any time soon. or better yet ever.

Walking to a rich mahogany display table, Sunny put on black woolen gloves and retrieved an elegant lacquered box, placing it down carefully.

Then, he opened the lid and smiled at Awakened Telle politely.

"Please, take a look."

Inside the box was a Memory that he had recently finished crafting.

Chapter-1606: Belated Apology

Inside the lacquered box, an intricately engraved vambrace was laying on black silk. It was forged from a light silvery metal and decorated with a pattern resembling interlaid feathers. The vambrace emanated a feeling of restrained power, and just from a passing glance, one could tell that it was an extraordinary item.

Awakened Telle, however, seemed unimpressed.

Well… from what Sunny could remember, she always seemed that way.

The young woman raised an eyebrow.

"Master Sunless. From what I remember, I commissioned you to procure a suit of armor."

He smiled.

"Your memory is stellar, my lady. But don't be concerned… this vambrace possesses a rare enchantment that allows it to unfold into a full plate of impregnable armor, just like what you wished to purchase. The process only takes a second, and consumes very little essence. While such a trait might bring a slight inconvenience in case of a sudden attack, it also makes this Memory uniquely adaptable."

Telle's eyes gleamed.

"...I assume that it can be used by a Saint?"

Sunny nodded.

"Indeed. It can accommodate any type of Transformed creature up to about fifty times the size of an average human. The speed with which the vambrace unfolds remains the same. Of course, the essence

expenditure grows in proportion."

He continued to smile, but really, Sunny wanted to cry on the inside.

That was because it took him an incredible quantity of magical alloy to create the damned vambrace. The thing looked small, but he would have had to bankrupt the Brilliant Emporium in order to purchase the materials needed to forge it... if anyone would even sell them to him.

In the end, he had been forced to track down and kill a dozen Corrupted Beasts with metallic carapaces to complete the commission.

Which meant that Sunny had not suffered a loss… but he could have sold all that Transcendent steel, instead!

His heart was bleeding.

In fact, he was even lamenting the cost of the expensive lacquered box with silk furbishing that Aiko had made him buy for the vambrace.

'But it is for a good cause.'

Sunny had to remind himself why he had put in extra effort to make sure that this Memory was particularly potent and durable.

Awakened Telle finally showed a hint of satisfaction. She studied the Memory for a few moments, then asked in a slightly warmer tone:

"You have conducted a thorough study of its other enchantments, of course. What are they? Oh, and what is its name?"

Sunny carefully picked up the vambrace and began the description:

"My lady, this Transcendent Memory of the Fourth Tier is called the Belated Apology. Apart from the unfolding enchantment, it also possesses three others. One vastly enhances its physical durability. The other grants the person wearing it greatly increased protection from elemental attacks. Finally, the third enchantment might interest you the most.

It allows the master of the Memory to make it as light as a feather."

Unbelievably… a smile appeared on the young woman's stern face.

Well, of course it did. That set of enchantments was almost perfect for an armor-type Memory.

"That's perfect! That is exactly what my father needs!"

Sunny hid a smile and put the vambrace back in the box.

Then, he asked, pretending to do it only out of politeness:

"Oh? And how is Saint Roan doing?"

…Indeed, the young woman in front of him was Lady Telle of the White Feather clan. She was the daughter of Saint Tyris and Master Roan… although the latter was also a Transcendent now.

Sunny had bumped into her a few times in the Sanctuary of Noctis, and later in Falcon Scott. To his shame, though, he had never known that the standoffish girl was actually the daughter of his benefactors, mostly because of how young her parents looked. Determining the age of Awakened was a messy affair.

It was only after coming to Bastion that Sunny realized his mistake.

Telle smiled a little.

"He's doing well, apart from lacking a good Transcendent armor… and still being in the doghouse because of having challenged the Third Nightmare against mother's wishes…"

She fell silent abruptly.

"W—wait, why am I telling you this?"

The young woman looked at Sunny with wide eyes.

Then, strangely enough, she blushed a little and looked away.

"...Well, in any case, both of my parents are fine. They are awfully busy, of course."

Sunny was a bit perplexed by her reactions, but just shrugged mentally.

'Unsurprising.'

There were very few Legacy Clans being led by two Saints. The White Feather's prominence had risen greatly since their exile to Antarctica — and therefore, so had their duties. No one could discard them anymore.

Sunny smiled and lowered his head with respect.

"That is good to hear. I wish them all the best."

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Young Lady Telle of White Feather ended up purchasing the Belated Apology and leaving the Brilliant Emporium in good spirits. Aiko was happily counting the money, as well.

And since Sunny knew that the Memory he had painstakingly created would serve Saint Roan well, he was in a good mood, too.

Not long after that, evening came. More customers visited the Brilliant Emporium to enjoy tea and snacks after a long day of work. The evening crowd receded, and the sun disappeared beyond the horizon. Moonlight and darkness enveloped the streets of Bastion, and the city slowly grew quieter.

Aiko left, leaving Sunny in the empty cottage.

He cleaned up the dining hall, and then went to the porch to breathe some fresh air.

Looking at the thriving city surrounding him, full of countless people… Sunny felt painfully alone.

Especially today, he couldn't help but feel it sharply.

Sunny remained on the porch for a while, watching the pale moon slowly move across the starlit sky.

Then, he sighed and went inside.

'I'll clean up the kitchen, then go to bed. Everything else can wait until tomorrow.'

This day had been strangely eventful.

He was busy washing the kitchen utensils when the Silver Bell suddenly rang again. Surprised at the appearance of a late customer, Sunny raised an eyebrow and walked into the dining hall.

"I'm sorry, but we are about to close…"

The words died on his lips.

Out there, in front of him, stood a delicate young woman in a seawave cloak. Her hair was like a cascade of pale gold, and her eyes… were hidden behind a strip of blue cloth.

Despite the blindfold hiding her eyes, the young woman's ethereal, otherworldly beauty was simply breathtaking.

She lingered for a moment, then turned her head in the direction of Sunny's voice.

"Oh… I am sorry. I'm afraid I'm a bit late, then."

Sunny remained silent, trying to overcome his shock.

'What… what is she doing here?'

He suppressed his emotions and put on the polite smile of a humble shopkeeper.

"No, no. It's no trouble. What did you want? I'll prepare it quickly."

The young woman tilted her head a little, then said hesitantly:

"My name is…"

He interrupted her, trying to put an appropriate amount of respect and reverence into his voice:

"I know who you are, Lady Song of the Fallen. Who in Bastion doesn't? I am the owner of the Brilliant Emporium... you can call me Master Sunless. It's an honor to meet you."

Cassie sighed, then nodded curtly. Eventually, she said:

"... I heard that you can procure rare Memories. Or make them."

Sunny froze for a moment.

'Ah.'

One of the Fire Keepers must have recommended him to her. And knowing Cassie, it must not have taken her long to discover that the owner of the Brilliant Emporium did not just sell Memories, but also crafted them.

But why would she come to him? All the enchanters of Clan Valor were at her disposal.

Sunny took a deep breath.

"Are you interested in commissioning a Memory, my lady?"

She nodded again.

"In a way."

He smiled. Now, he was in familiar territory.

"Great! I am sure that you won't be disappointed in my services. Just today, a member of the renowned White Feather clan purchased a Memory from our stock. They were extremely satisfied with its quality."

Cassie smiled, then shifted slightly as if looking around.

"That is good to hear. The Memory I want you to make must be of the highest quality."

She lingered for a few moments, then turned to him and added in a neutral tone:

"Oh, and by the way…"

Her smile wavered a little.

"...Happy Birthday."

Chapter-1607: Godgrave

A vast white plain was shining under blinding sunlight. It seemed deceptively endless, devoid of any features. No living thing was moving across its surface, and none would dare to.

Changing Star of the Immortal Flame Clan was kneeling on that plain. She had been kneeling there for three days without moving a muscle, and even her right hand was frozen in the air, holding the hilt of a silvery sword. Its blade was like a radiant mirror reflecting a boundless white void.

Her impassive face was showing signs of fatigue, but her beautiful grey eyes were cold and sharp, full of indomitable resolve that bordered on obsession.

Her silver hair was moving slightly in the wind.

"Lady N—ephis… the wind…"

Staying still like a statue, she spoke without looking back:

"I know. Stay strong."

There were a few moments of silence, and then another voice spoke:

"I… don't know how much longer I can endure."

Nephis answered evenly, white sparks igniting in the depths of her calm eyes:

"Stop talking unless you want to die."

She wasn't threatening the man, simply stating a fact. In response to her words, there was silence.

The wind blew across the white plain, crashing into her with furious

force. There were a few gasps from behind Nephis, and yet, no member of her retinue allowed themselves to be shaken by the squall.

The only thing that moved was the torn veil of ominous grey clouds. It swirled and flowed, slowly obscuring the merciless sky… not that Nephis could see it, frozen as she was. All she could see was the shadow slowly spreading across the flawless white plain.

Where the shadow of the clouds was cast, the white surface lost its blinding radiance, becoming easy to look at. As Nephis watched the radiance dim, her face remained motionless… her heart, however, started beating faster.

Finally, the stormy veil repaired itself, and the sky became completely hidden behind it. The blade of Neph's sword was extinguished, reflecting nothing but a swirling expanse of grey clouds now. The clouds were glowing brightly with diffused and scattered light.

She let out a quiet sigh.

Behind her, bodies hit the ground in a clatter of metal, and pained groans tore apart the silence. Nephis remained motionless for a few moments, then lowered her sword and slowly stood up.

'This one was long.'

Turning around, she looked at the seven Masters that were sprawled on the ground, panting as they tried to recover from three days of torturous stillness. Shim, Kaor, Shakti, Sid, Gorn, Gantry, and Erlas… they were the Fire Keepers that had followed her into the Death Zone on this mission. The rest were in less dangerous regions of the Dream Realm, searching for young Sleepers.

Far away.

There had been a time when Bastion, located in the heartland of the Dream Realm, was separated from Ravenheart by an immeasurable distance. Ravenheart was situated far north-west, after all, on the outskirts of the Hollow Mountains.

But Awakened had conquered a lot of territory in the last few

decades. Led by the Great Clans, humans had greatly expanded their area of influence in the Dream Realm. The two enclaves had swallowed many regions… and yet, they still did not share a border.

In the south, both the Sword Domain and the Song Domain bordered the Stormsea, which was ruled by the House of Night. In the north, the Hollow Mountains stood like an impregnable wall in the path of human expansion.

The two Domains were separated by a Death Zone — or rather, several of them, stretching from the Hollow Mountains all the way to the Stormsea. This deadly territory widened in the south, but was comparatively narrow in the north. Which meant that if the two enclaves were to be connected by land, the narrowest and northernmost region separating them had to be conquered.

And that was where Nephis and the Fire Keepers had been sent… to the Death Zone far in the north. This place, which had taken the lives of many powerful Awakened, had no official name. However, people often called it the Godgrave.

The reason for it was rather simple.

Turning her head slightly, Nephis looked north. Out there, far in the distance, a titanic skull was laying on the misty slopes of the Hollow Mountains, staring back at her with one colossal, empty eye socket. Deep darkness nestled in its gaping chasm, still and foreboding.

The other eye socket, as well as the forehead and the entire left side of the titanic skull, had been entirely shattered by some unimaginable blow. The bone splinters, which had rained down thousands of years ago, created mountain peaks of their own.

The skull was connected to a white spine, which stretched south from the Hollow Mountains. In fact, it was connected to an entire skeleton of inconceivable proportions. From the top of the skull to the right knee joint, which was the southernmost intact point of the skeleton, it was at least five thousand kilometers in length.

The skeleton and the ground below it… was the Death Zone. It was called Godgrave because Awakened, shocked and frightened by the

terrifying size of the ancient remains, had speculated that it was the corpse of a god.

Of course, Nephis did not think the same way.

In any case, the right hand of the skeleton lay in the Song Domain, while the left hand lay in the Sword Domain. By climbing the skeletal arms, one could travel along the bones of the titanic corpse.

If they could survive the journey, of course, which very few could.

The seemingly endless white plain where Nephis stood was actually the skeleton's breastbone. She had led the Fire Keepers here, climbing up the shattered left arm of the ancient corpse, fighting her way across its vast collar bone, and making progress south over the past two weeks.

The progress was slow because they could not fly the Chain Breaker here. It was too dangerous.

There were three ways of traversing Godgrave, ranging from deadly to absolutely lethal.

The most suicidal one was to move across the ground, which was shrouded in twilight and covered by a carpet of ash. The Death Zones were regions of the Dream Realm where Great, Cursed, and Unholy Nightmare Creatures dwelled… and in this Death Zone, the deadliest things were hiding beneath the ash. Anyone who stepped on it was doomed to be consumed.

The second way was not much better. It was to travel in the great hollows of the titanic bones, hidden from the sky. The hollows were the safest place in Godgrave… and for that reason, they were home to an entire ecosystem of harrowing Nightmare Creatures and tainted flora, all hungering for the taste of human souls.

Fighting through that monstrous jungle that thrived within the inconceivable skeleton was just as suicidal.

The last way was to traverse the surface of the ancient bones. Here, there were fewer dreadful abominations, and those who did prowl the surface were a bit less powerful. But that was for a reason, as

well.

The reason was that Godgrave had a peculiar nature. There were no nights here, and the sky was constantly shrouded by a veil of clouds. If the veil was broken, though, revealing the radiant white sky…

Anything that moved under the open sky was immediately erased from existence, turning into scattering ash. There was no exception to the rule, and no salvation from the gaze of heaven.

So, that was why Nephis and the Fire Keepers had spent three days without daring to move a muscle. They had been waiting for the torn clouds to hide the sky once again.

And now that the grey veil was mended by the wind, they could continue on their mission…

To find the mysterious Saint who was rumored to have made his home at the very edge of the titanic breastbone, right before the abyssal chasm leading to the skeleton's spine.

The man known as the Lord of Shadows.

Chapter-1608: Death Zone

Nephis studied the immaculately white bone plain in front of her for a few moments, then turned around and looked at the Fire Keepers. They were gracelessly sprawled on the ground, with pained expressions on their faces. Even with their powerful Ascended bodies, it had not been easy to remain completely still for three long days.

If there was one consolation, it was that Nightmare Creatures they had been fighting when the merciless skies revealed themselves were nothing but ash now. The Fire Keepers, meanwhile, had all survived.

There was a reason why she had chosen this particular cohort to follow her into the Godgrave.

The Fire Keepers were a fearsome force even now, when the number of Awakened, Masters, and Saints had vastly increased. That was because each of them was an Ascended, and a cohesive battle unit consisting of close to fifty seasoned Masters could not be ignored by anyone.

Not to mention that the Fire Keepers were the survivors of the Forgotten Shore, and as such, could be easily called the most talented Awakened warriors of their generation… all generations, perhaps.

These warriors were her personal army, and under her leadership, their brilliant glory and fame had grown explosively in the past four years. The Ivory Tower, the Chain Breaker, the crest of the Fire Keepers, and her own name, Changing Star, had all become symbols of unrivaled virtue, valor, and excellence.

Their names were known far and wide, all according to her conscious will and intent.

The Fire Keepers were her heralds and emissaries, but each was also a heroic figure in their own right… still, some of them had more

renown than others. The seven Masters in front of her had once been Cassie's own cohort, and therefore, they were a cut above the rest.

That was not the reason why Nephis had chosen them for this mission, though. The real reason was that one of the members of the cohort, Erlas, possessed an Aspect that could augment the endurance and stamina of his allies. Knowing what waited for them in Godgrave, she wanted to have his powers at hand for when the white void of the sky above the ancient corpse was revealed.

As it turned out, her consideration had not been in vain. If not for his support, the last three days would have been much more torturous, and potentially fatal for the members of her retinue.

Even Nephis had felt the strain. Nevertheless, there was no time to waste.

Looking at the Fire Keepers, she said evenly:

"We have five minutes to recover. Five more to drink water and eat. Then, we continue south."

Such a short span of time was not enough for them to rest their weary bodies, but it was better to relieve the fatigue on the move. The sky was not the only danger in this desolate bone expanse, after all.

"Yes, Lady Nephis."

The Fire Keepers groaned as they started to move. Storage Memories were summoned, water and field rations were hastily consumed. Shim, the leader of the cohort, used his healing powers to help the less resilient members recover faster. They were seasoned veterans and did not need her to tell them what to do.

Nephis used the short rest to quench her thirst, as well.

By the time the ten minutes she had given her subordinates ran out, the bone plain was already starting to move.

"Ready your weapons! Forward!"

As she started to walk, the Fire Keepers followed her.

Although the sun-bleached bones of the dead god — or whatever the ancient skeleton had been, once — seemed like a continuous surface of solid white, in truth, they were littered with cracks and fissures. The deepest of those cracks led to the great hollows within the titanic bones, and the inner hell hidden in their horrid expanse.

Merely ten minutes after the veil of clouds had been mended, those cracks exploded with life. Tendrils of vibrant red moss and vermilion grass spread from them, devouring the flawlessly white surface of the ancient bones. Swarms of tiny Nightmare Creatures were instantly born, hunting each other as they moved between the stalks of grass.

That was only the beginning.

Since everything that moved under the merciless gaze of the white sky was instantly incinerated, the abominable life thriving in Godgrave had adapted to its whims. There was no way to predict when the veil of clouds would be torn, and how long it would take for the stormy barrier to repair itself. Therefore, everything here lived at incredible speed.

The red moss, the vermilion grass, the tiny Nightmare Creatures, and the larger abominations that were yet to be born… all of them were in a hurry to be born, grow, consume, and propagate before turning to ash. The white plain was bare and featureless a few minutes ago, but in an hour or two, it would be teeming with horrid life.

If the veil of clouds was not broken for the next several days, Godgrave would come to look as if the infernal subterranean jungle had escaped the great hollows. By then, the most harrowing of the surface hunters would have been born and reached maturity, making the surface of the bones almost as dangerous as their inner expanse.

But even now, Nephis and the Fire Keepers were already in danger.

The predatory vegetation and the swarms of tiny critters were enough to envelop and devour a legion of Masters.

This… was the Death Zone.

Watching a sea of red slowly surround them, crawling closer with each moment, Nephis silently raised her sword.

"Prepare."

As she brandished the silver sword, a wave of sparks exploded from where its tip scraped against the surface of the white bone.

A moment later, each of the sparks exploded with a thundering roar, and a flood of white flame was unleashed into the world. The wave of fire rolled forward and enveloped a wide swath of the red grass, incinerating countless vermin in an instant.

It did not stop there, though.

Following Neph's will, the flames moved, turning into a wide ring around the Fire Keepers. Then, it spread in all directions like a flash fire, flooding the air with heat and ash.

Soon, the vast bone plain had turned into a terrible white inferno.

Chapter-1609: Reclusive Saint

White flames danced across the bone plain, incinerating the vermilion grass and the swarms of tiny abominations that had just been born moments ago. Unbearable heat assaulted the cohort of the Fire Keepers, and the air was suddenly full of swirling ash.

The eyes of their lady burned in the haze like two cold stars.

"Mounts!"

A whirlwind of ethereal sparks surrounded the cohort, soon forming into eight bestial Echoes. Each of them was unique, but shared a common trait — most of these Echoes were not powerful enough to be of aid in a fierce battle. However, they were fast and could be ridden, serving the Fire Keepers as mounts.

Many Masters spent considerable time hunting down suitable types of Dormant Nightmare Creatures to procure such Echoes. The braver ones hunted Awakened abominations, while some lucky ones even had Ascended beasts as their steeds.

Nephis was the exception to the rule, since the steel stallion she had summoned was an artificial Echo created by the enchanters of the Great Clan Valor.

Being the adopted daughter of a Sovereign had its advantages, even if the royal gifts came with an insurmountable cost.

"Forward!"

The eight Echoes formed into a wedge and rushed across the burning plain, swiftly moving south. The sea of flames parted in front of them, and then rolled forward, protecting the flanks of the formation.

Nephis rode at the head of the wedge, looking ahead with a focused

expression. Her sword had changed form, turning into a silver lance. The Fire Keepers were ready for battle, too — despite the wall of fire that surrounded them, no one dared to lower their guard.

And for a good reason.

Soon, Shakti and Erlas — the archers of the cohort — drew their bows and let enchanted arrows loose. There were larger shadows moving behind the wall of flame, surrounded by ash, since the inhabitants of Godgrave had had more time to be born and grow here.

From that moment, their advance turned into a tense and perilous affair. Nephis sustained the rolling curtain of flame, preventing the cohort from being consumed by the red grass, and led the charge. The Fire Keepers met whatever Nightmare Creature the Death Zone threw at them with calm coordination.

There were no Great abominations on the surface of the ancient skeleton, at least not that soon after the white sky had wiped the slate clean. So, it was well within their ability to handle the onslaught of newborn monstrosities.

Granted, the Fire Keepers were far more able than most Masters.

It was to the point that Nephis had time to think without having to concentrate entirely on the battle.

After a while, she thought silently:

[Cassie.]

A few moments later, Cassie's voice resounded in her head, as if the blind seer was there, by her side, whispering into her ear:

[Yes?]

Cassie's powers had changed and grown after Transcendence, as well. Her Dormant Ability now allowed the blind girl to learn more about the people and creatures she perceived. Her Awakened Ability allowed her to sense longer into the future. Her Ascended Ability not only allowed her to perceive the world through other people's senses,

but also to communicate with those she had marked.

So, Cassie was like a spider waiting at the heart of a vast web. Even Nephis did not know how many people throughout the two worlds were serving as her eyes and ears… just that there were many, scattered around both the waking world and the Dream Realm. Some of the spies in the blind seer's network were willing agents, while others did not even know that they had been marked.

The latter consumed more of Cassie's soul essence, sadly.

Regardless, her ability to gather information was an incredible boon to them. It was just that…

Nephis frowned slightly.

The nature of her friend's power had changed subtly after the Third Nightmare. From what Cassie had shared, it seemed like her ability to receive visions of the future was compromised, somehow, making them strange and chaotic. Cassie herself had begun to act strangely, sometimes, as well.

Nephis was concerned.

Turning her steel steed slightly to avoid a large crack in the white bone, she thought:

[Tell me about this Lord of Shadows again.]

The man she had been sent to negotiate with was more than a little mysterious. There were many more Saints in the world now, true… however, it was still strange for an independent Transcendent to exist out there, especially one whose origin and background were entirely unknown.

Not to mention one powerful enough to not only survive in the Godgrave, but also make it his home.

Cassie remained silent for a few moments. Then, her voice resounded once again, whispering into Neph's ear:

[Not much is known about him, really. What we do know comes from

a dozen Sleepers who were unfortunate enough to be sent to Godgrave last year. They were all rescued by a mysterious Saint and brought to a Citadel under his control. The Saint did not speak with them much, and was rather aloof. In fact, some of them even describe him as sinister and frightening.]

Nephis had already heard all of this, of course. However, there was no harm in going over what they knew once more, just in case there was some hint she had missed.

After a momentary pause, Cassie continued:

[He has to be strong, considering where his Citadel is located. The Sleepers also confirmed that his Aspect has to do with shadows, and that he commands several powerful Echoes. Apart from that, there's very little information about him.

Instead of allowing the Sleepers to place their anchors in his Citadel, the Lord of Shadows escorted them out of Godgrave and sent them on the path to one of Song's strongholds.]

Nephis frowned.

[So he might be friendly with Clan Song?]

Cassie lingered for a bit.

[Both Valor and Song have their eyes on Godgrave. Considering that it is most likely to become the main battlefield of their war, how can they not? So, understandably, both Domains are very interested in a powerful Saint dwelling in the depths of this deadly region. Actually, Valor is not the first clan to try recruiting the Lord of Shadows.]

Neph's gaze darkened.

[Is it true? That they sent…]

Cassie's answer came swiftly:

[Indeed, they sent Mordret… well, one of his bodies, at least. However, he failed to persuade the Lord of Shadows to swear allegiance to the Queen of Worms.]

If the Prince of Nothing had succeeded, Nephis would not have been sent to find the reclusive Saint. But how had he failed?

[It is strange, though, isn't it? I doubt that Mordret would have simply accepted a refusal. He would have definitely tried to consume that Saint if persuading him was impossible.]

Cassie's voice changed slightly:

[That is the most interesting part. It is not confirmed, of course… but, from what we managed to learn… Mordret was actually defeated. His vessel was destroyed.]

Nephis took a deep breath.

'Is there really someone else capable of defeating that monster?'

She had once fought against Soul Stealer, after all. So, Nephis knew better than anyone what Saint Mordret was really capable of… in fact, that man was no less of a plague than Skinwalker, whom most of humanity lived in constant terror of.

If Lord of Shadows was really capable of fighting against the Prince of Nothing…

Neph's calm grey eyes gleamed coldly as she contemplated the future.

Chapter-1610: Land of Shadows

They crossed most of the remaining distance to the edge of the breastbone plain that day. Night never graced Godgrave with its presence, but anywhere else, the sun would have already been rolling toward the horizon.

It was never dark in this strange and terrible place. The grey sky shone with diffused light, and white bone was colored here and there by fields of vibrant vermilion grass…

Or rather, it was never supposed to be dark.

Nephis slowed her steed as she peered into the distance, a complicated expression appearing on her face.

'What is that?'

Out there, far away, it was as though someone had dropped a can of black paint on the world. The darkness, which was not supposed to exist in Godgrave, swallowed the plain, and the scattered light of the stormy sky was powerless against it. The deep shadows persisted, unperturbed by the bright daylight around them.

'How is this possible?'

Soon, they drew closer to the wall of darkness. Strangely enough, there were much fewer abominations in this area of the titanic skeleton, and even the scarlet flora seemed scarcer.

It was as though even the Nightmare Creatures were wary of the land of shadows.

Nephis frowned slightly, not showing her hesitation to the Fire Keepers.

"Advance slowly."

As they proceeded further, the light slowly dimmed, and the growths of red grass became smaller and smaller, until they disappeared entirely. Soon, they were surrounded by nothing but impenetrable darkness, with only Neph's eyes shining in it like small stars.

"Stop."

She remained silent for a moment, listening to the silence, then said evenly:

"Dismount."

The Fire Keepers jumped down from their Echoes, dismissing them into a rain of sparks. Their surroundings were illuminated for a few moments, and by the time the sparks dissipated into nothingness, they had already summoned enchanted lanterns.

A flood of stark white light flooded the dark land. However, it seemed weak and faltering, barely able to force the deep, dark shadows to recede a little.

Nevertheless, Nephis did see something now that the luminous Memories pushed the darkness back.

A few meters away from them, a massive carcass was laying on the ground, its grotesque bones towering above the plain. The creature must have been enormous once, but now it was broken and dead.

What killed it?

Nephis walked over to the carcass and studied it for a few moments, spending a bit more time looking at the clean cut where the monster's head had been severed.

"Lady Nephis… what do you think?"

She lingered for a while, then shook her head.

"The head was severed by a sword, but something had gnawed on the bones. There are teeth marks everywhere, and by the look of it, the

creature's flesh was devoured by something large. Most importantly…"

Her expression grew a little somber.

"Considering where we are, this carcass must belong to a Great Nightmare Creature."

Had it been killed by the Lord of Shadows? If so, the rumors of his power might not be exaggerated. Many Saints were capable of slaying Great Beasts, but very few could finish such a powerful abomination with one strike.

Nephis was about to say something else, but at that moment, a terrifying roar tore apart the silence. Something was rushing toward them from the darkness.

The Fire Keepers instantly assumed a battle formation. Shim and Sid moved forward, raising their shields, Gantry and Gorn took positions a step behind and to the side of them, while Shakti and Erlas hid behind the melee fighters while summoning their arrows. Lastly, Kaor moved to the rear of the cohort, ready to defend his comrades in case of an unexpected attack.

Nephis remained where she stood, calmly looking into the darkness. Her lance had changed form once again, turning back into a longsword.

"Be ready."

They heard the sound of massive claws scraping against bone as the Nightmare Creature approached at high speed. Judging by that speed, the abomination was powerful.

It was going to reach the Fire Keepers in a matter of seconds.

…Before it did, however, something rustled in the air, and they heard the familiar, gruesome sound of flesh being severed by sharp steel. Something crashed heavily onto the ground, and a moment later, a monstrous head rolled into the light, a river of blood spilling from its cut neck.

'One strike.'

Nephis looked at the abomination's severed head for a split second, then turned to face the darkness.

There, two crimson flames ignited, staring down at her.

Then, something walked out of the darkness and stopped at the edge of light, making the Fire Keepers tremble.

'What in the world…'

The graceful creature looked like a beautiful onyx statue that had come to life. Her fearsome black armor seemed to be carved from polished stone, and forged according to an intricate, elegant design. The dark sword she was holding was smeared in blood, radiating a sense of chilling, inescapable lethality.

The demonic statue towered above Nephis and the Fire Keepers, much higher than even Effie was, observing them with cold indifference. There was no hostility in her gaze, but also no benevolence.

She was clearly not human.

However, the living statue did not seem like a Nightmare Creature, either. She was more like… a Transcendent Echo? A Saint?

However, Nephis had never met an Echo... or a Saint, really... who exerted so much pressure on her. The graceful knight's onyx body radiated a sense of vast, dreadful power, and the menacing crimson flames dancing in her ruby eyes were full of strange, inhuman will.

She was strong.

In fact, if Nephis was not here and the strange creature decided to attack the Fire Keepers, they would most likely all perish under her blade.

The question was… would the living statue attack them, or not?

As Nephis looked at the demonic knight calmly, ready for both

outcomes…

The beautiful onyx statue lowered her sword and turned away, then beckoned for them to follow her with indifferent grace.

Chapter-1611: Nameless Temple

Nephis and the Fire Keepers followed the onyx devil across the land of shadows. Their taciturn guide walked without looking back, her beautiful armor gleaming as it reflected the white light of their lanterns. The living statue's steps were neither slow nor hurried, her measured pace full of indifferent confidence.

It was as though she was not afraid of the creatures hiding in the dark at all.

Nephis would have expected the steps of such a heavy creature to resound like thunderclaps in the dead silence, but they were entirely noiseless. She stared at the back of the mysterious stone knight, white flames dancing in her eyes.

The Fire Keepers were tense and quiet, looking into the eerie darkness with wary expressions.

'What is going on?'

Nephis was not troubled, but she did feel somewhat curious. A vast expanse of inexplicable darkness, the fearsome creature that had been sent to meet them… it was all hard to explain, and she rarely encountered things that escaped explanation.

[Cassie?]

There were a few moments of silence, and then the familiar voice resounded in the darkness, answering the question she had not asked:

[It is… strange.]

Nephis glanced at the beautiful stone demon and waited. Cassie continued after a short pause:

[She is a Transcendent Devil. Her soul is an impossible fusion of shadow, darkness, and divine flame. Her powers are those of a sword saint… however, she is not a simple Echo. I… I don't know what she is.]

Nephis nodded calmly.

[That is alright. I do.]

Indeed, it would have been strange if she had not recognized that fearsome stonelike armor, that cold presence, and those jewel eyes.

The onyx devil was one of Nether's children, after all. They were what she looked up to in the depths of the Second Nightmare, drowning in despair as the darkness of the Underworld crushed and suffocated her. The prideful beings who ruled the great caverns of the Hollow Mountains while she struggled to survive far below, at the edge of the abyss.

In fact, the body she had inhabited was one of the countless flawed vessels that Nether had callously discarded before successfully creating the first of the Stone Saints.

So… in a sense, the onyx devil was a more perfect version of what Nephis used to be.

But what was she doing here? Had some of Nether's children succumbed to Corruption and survived until this day? Had the Lord of Shadows killed one of them?

Nephis tilted her head slightly.

The Stone Saints had been known to command true darkness, each inheriting a spark of divinity from their creator, as well. But why did this one possess an affinity to shadows? That was not in their nature.

Did it have something to do with the Aspect of the Lord of Shadows?

And this lightless expanse around them… had he somehow conjured it, as well?

Was it something that a mere Transcendent could do?

Her curiosity grew a little.

Meanwhile, the beautiful onyx devil led them deeper and deeper into the darkness. Considering how difficult it must have been to chase away the deadly sunlight of Godgrave, Nephis had not expected for this shadowy region to be expansive. But to her surprise, the land of shadows stretched for many kilometers in all directions, without a hint of ending.

'Odd.'

The further they went, the more eerie their surroundings became. Because sunlight never reached here, there was nothing to incinerate the bones of slain Nightmare Creatures. Therefore, remains of powerful abominations appeared in sight from time to time, all devoid of flesh.

At first, there were few of them, but the deeper into the land of shadows the Fire Keepers ventured, the more and more skeletal remains they saw.

Some of the abominations had been slain by sharp steel, some shattered and broken by brute force, some killed by strange means that she couldn't even guess.

Eventually, it was as if they were walking across a terrible battlefield. The magnitude of slaughter that had transpired in this ominous place was nothing short of chilling. Even if all these powerful Nightmare Creatures had not been slain at the same time… what kind of person was capable of eviscerating this many dreadful abominations in the depths of a Death Zone?

It seemed that there was a seed of truth in the ominous rumors about the dire power of the Lord of Shadows.

In the end, it had taken almost half a day for the onyx devil to lead them to their destination. The signs of fierce battles that had transpired under the cover of darkness only grew more apparent.

'...Almost fifty kilometers to reach the heart of his territory.'

Out there, in front of Nephis, the breastbone plain abruptly ended,

turning into a vast chasm. If she could pierce the darkness with her gaze, she would have seen the spine of the titanic skeleton far below. To her left and to her right, in the distance, its ribs must be rising like mountains.

Right ahead, though…

Illuminated by the light of their lanterns, a magnificent temple stood at the very edge of the abyss. Its colossal columns and walls were cut from black marble, with exquisite reliefs decorating the stygian pediment and broad frieze. Beautiful and awesome, it looked like the palace of a dark god.

In front of the palace, the ground was littered with countless bones.

Most of the ancient edifice was hidden by darkness, but Nephis felt oppressed by its solemn majesty nevertheless. She frowned slightly, feeling a shapeless presence gaze at her from behind the marble columns, and instinctively gripped the hilt of her sword.

"Is this… a Citadel?"

One of the Fire Keepers voiced her question in a tired and bewildered tone. Another answered warily:

"It must be. Who could have built a temple in this place?"

Nephis remained silent, observing the dark temple somberly.

She was not afraid of the Lord of Shadows, his onyx devil, and other secrets the mysterious Saint could have been hiding. However, should the negotiations go badly… fighting a powerful enemy within the walls of their Citadel was bound to be troublesome.

It would be a shame for the Citadel to be destroyed in the process, at least.

Glancing at their beautiful demonic guide, Nephis smiled slightly and nodded.

"Lead the way."

The living statue lingered for a moment, then started climbing the steps of the temple. Nephis and the Fire Keepers followed.

Soon, they passed between the towering black columns and reached a grandiose hall.

Its dark expanse was drowning in impenetrable shadows.

Chapter-1612: An Audience with the Lord

The interior of the dark temple was drowning in deep shadows, and the enchanted lanterns of the Fire Keepers seemed even weaker in their cold embrace. The light emanating from the luminous Memories flickered, barely able to illuminate a narrow circle around them.

In fact, it was not even the shadows themselves… Neph's eyes narrowed when she felt the subtle presence of the being who was hiding in the depths of the hall wash over her like a tidal wave. Suddenly, the darkness around them seemed infinitely more dark, in turn making the light starker.

'...Strong.'

While Nephis was peering into the darkness, their silent guide walked to the side and turned around, resting the tip of her sword on the stone floor of the temple. It was as though the onyx devil assumed the position of an entrance guard.

…There was another strange sculpture on the other side of them. This one was at least five meters tall and resembled a four-armed fiend that had escaped from the depths of a fiery hell, his mighty body forged from polished black silver. The infernal troll had long, sharp spikes protruding from his steel carapace, as if he was made from countless shattered swords.

No, not a sculpture.

As the towering fiend moved slightly, the infernal flames burning in his eyes ignited with hungry malice.

The Fire Keepers grew tense under the gaze of the menacing giant.

Nephis remained unperturbed.

A moment later, Cassie whispered into her ear:

[It is… it is a Supreme Devil. His body is incredibly durable and almost immune to fire.]

'...Bothersome.'

Killing a Supreme Devil was not impossible, but this one seemed especially tough. Melting him down would be a chore…

Of course, there were ways to deal with such turtle-like enemies. It was just that fighting the towering fiend and the onyx devil at the same time would not be convenient. In fact, Nether's daughter felt more dangerous despite being of a lower Rank.

In any case, neither of them showed signs of wanting to attack the guests. They just stood motionlessly, as if inviting them to walk deeper into the temple.

Nephis passed between the two powerful monsters and did just that. The Fire Keepers followed, looking oppressed by the inhospitable darkness.

When they reached the middle of the great hall, she stopped. In front of them… the shadows grew even deeper, and the light of the lanterns simply drowned in them, disappearing without any effect.

It seemed that the Lord of Shadows did not wish to be seen.

Nephis sighed and looked up.

She could feel something enormous moving in the darkness beyond, staring at her from incredible height. At the same time, a chilling sound resounded in the silence of the ancient temple, surrounding her and her warriors from all sides. Like the rustle of countless scales as they scratched against the ancient marble.

It was as though a colossal serpent was slithering in the darkness, uncoiling its gargantuan body to raise its long neck and gaze upon them from the darkness.

Not being able to see the giant creature was a little uncomfortable.

Luckily, Cassie was there to help Nephis know what she faced:

[A… a Transcendent Terror.]

Nephis frowned.

'How many powerful servants does the master of this temple have?'

She was… amused. Was the Lord of Shadows really independent? How come he had more powerful summons than she had, then? Wasn't it a bit ridiculous?

Granted, the Great Clan Valor did not treat its adopted daughter with nearly as much sincerity as it did Morgan. But still…

It was not the quantity of these monsters that mattered. It was just that Nephis could sense that each of them was far more ferocious and dangerous than any Echo she had seen.

Suddenly, she felt something very unexpected...

A hint of sympathy for the Prince of Nothing.

[What about the Lord of Shadows himself?]

Cassie remained silent for a few moments.

[I don't sense anyone else. There is nobody there…]

But just as she said that, a cold voice suddenly resounded from the darkness, enveloping the Fire Keepers like a death knell:

"Nephis of Valor… welcome. I did not expect to be visited by someone as exalted as the last daughter of the Immortal Flame."

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Sitting on a tall throne cut from black marble, Sunny looked down on Nephis and her warriors. His face, hidden behind the polished black wood of Weaver's mask, was impassive.

However, a storm of emotions was raging in his heart.

Here in his territory, where the Nameless Temple now stood, he was almost omniscient. That was because the Shadow Realm Fragment enveloped a vast area around the Citadel, allowing Sunny to perceive everything, everywhere, all at once.

So, he had been watching Saint guide Nephis and the Fire Keepers to the doors of the temple all along. Sunny had thought that he would be ready to face her.

But he had been wrong.

Seeing her face, her lustrous silver hair, her beautiful grey eyes, the familiar stubborn resolve shining in their calm depths…

It felt as if he had been struck by lightning.

His heart was beating faster than when he had been facing that Great Demon.

Looking at Nephis from the darkness, Sunny remembered all the reasons he had come up with to spare himself the pain of being close to the members of his former cohort.

At that moment, he understood one simple thing.

'...I'm doomed.'

Because the moment he saw Nephis, all reason was obliterated.

What was good about being reasonable, anyway? Hadn't he personally preached the benefits of being unreasonable before?

Sunny took a deep breath, and then leaned back, glancing at the huge head of the Soul Serpent hovering high above his throne.

Then, he lingered for a moment and said, keeping his voice calm and devoid of emotions:

"Nephis of Valor, welcome. I did not expect to be visited by someone as exalted as the last daughter of the Immortal Flame."

She stared into the darkness, then bowed slowly.

"Greetings, Lord of Shadows. I hope you don't mind being addressed this way… or would you prefer I call you something else?"

Sunny remained silent for a few moments.

Eventually, he answered evenly:

"I would not. But you can call me Shadow."

Chapter-1613: Decent Proposal

"I would not. But you can call me Shadow."

The voice of the man who called himself Shadow resounded in the lightless temple, making it seem as though the darkness itself had answered her question. That strangely elusive voice was cold and aloof, devoid of any emotion.

And yet, there was a hint of arrogance to it.

Nephis frowned subtly.

Now that the introductions were out of the way, it was time to announce the purpose of her visit. However, she was at a disadvantage. The master of the dark temple seemed to know everything about her, and yet, she knew close to nothing about him.

Even Cassie, whose gaze could pierce countless mysteries, seemed to be entirely blind to the existence of the Lord of Shadows.

…Granted, Nephis had some idea about his true identity.

The darkness spoke again, its voice remaining emotionless:

"To what do I owe the honor of being in the presence of Lady Changing Star? What do you want with me?"

Nephis hesitated for a moment, thinking.

She had been sent to persuade a powerful Saint to join the banner of the King of Swords. However, having reached his Citadel, Nephis had to reevaluate her opinion of the Lord of Shadows.

He was not merely powerful… no, he was one of those few like herself who were beyond the ordinary definitions of power.

Now that Nephis had seen the vast expanse of inexplicable darkness, the bones of dreadful abominations hidden in its tenebrous embrace, the solemn edifice of the dark temple, and the creatures that guarded it, she knew that the Lord of Shadows had not survived in Godgrave by luck, or by having an Aspect that was uniquely suited for living in this harrowing environment.

Rather, he had survived here through strength.

…Which only made him more desirable.

Of course, there were still many unknowns about the enigmatic Saint. Nephis could not be sure of what his powers truly were. The fierce creatures that served him were neither Echoes nor Nightmare Creatures… so, they could have been manifested by his Aspect, like the hideous Reflections of the Prince of Nothing were, or subjugated like those abominations that Beastmaster ruled.

It was unclear how strong the man himself was, or if his Aspect had any application in direct combat. It was also unknown where he had come from, and how he managed to become a Saint without leaving any traces of himself in either of the two worlds.

And yet, Nephis had a strong suspicion.

Awakened who possessed affinity to shadows were exceedingly rare, let alone those who were truly powerful. Meanwhile… five of the six divine lineages had already been reclaimed by humans.

Immortal Flame were the inheritors of Sun God, Valor were the inheritors of War God, Song were the inheritors of Beast God, Night were the inheritors of Storm God, and finally, Asterion was the sole inheritor of Heart God.

One last lineage remained unclaimed.

No one had been able to find and inherit the blood of Shadow God.

So… this man, a Saint of immense power that had come out of nowhere, wielding authority over shadows. Was he the proof that the last divine lineage had finally revealed itself?

If so… why now? What did it mean?

One thing was certain. Nephis had to change her approach, since her preconceived notions had been proven wrong. In this dark temple, her power and exalted status didn't mean much, because the man she wanted to persuade possessed the same power, and could claim the same status, should he wish to do so.

She had to treat the Lord of Shadows… as an equal.

Nephis smiled slightly.

"Then, Lord Shadow. I won't be coy… you asked me what I want? It's simple."

She paused for a moment, then added in her usual impassive tone:

"I want you."

She could hear the Fire Keepers shift behind her. One of them even seemed to choke, coughing loudly in the dead silence of the dark temple. His coughing somewhat spoiled the solemn atmosphere of her serious proposal.

The Lord of Shadow did not respond immediately, either.

'Well, of course. He must be carefully considering the benefits and disadvantages of pledging his allegiance to the Sword Domain. I wouldn't expect anything else.'

However, the silence stretched for longer than she had expected.

'I see. He must be contemplating very deeply.'

Nephis was nothing if not patient. So, she waited patiently, giving the enigmatic Saint time to seriously consider his decision.

After a while, the Lord of Shadows spoke again, his elusive voice sounding a little flat:

"What, exactly… do you mean?"

Nephis was slightly taken aback, but masterfully hid her confusion. Had she not been clear?

"Allow me to clarify, then. I, Changing Star, invite you to join the alliance of Transcendent warriors and serve under the banner of the King of Swords, protecting and expanding the domain of humanity in the Dream Realm as one of his champions."

She lingered for a moment, and then added:

"I trust I do not need to list the benefits of pledging allegiance to one of those who have achieved Supremacy. These details can be discussed later, anyway. Resources, assistance, powerful Memories and Echoes, soul shards… nothing is out of the question. You won't be undervalued, Lord Shadow. No one survives in the Dream Realm alone, after all."

There were a few moments of silence, and then the cold voice resounded from the darkness once again:

"Ah. Thank you for the clarification."

Nephis tilted her head a little.

'What else did he think I meant?'

Had she said something odd again?

'No, it shouldn't be.'

Nephis frowned slightly.

She thought she had done rather well…

The problem was most likely that the emissary of Song must have offered all the same things to the Lord of Shadows, if not more. And yet, they had been refused.

While she was contemplating, a cold laughter resounded in the dark temple, traveling across the great hall like wind. The Fire Keepers shivered, gripping their weapons tighter.

A few moments later, Shadow's voice came from the darkness, finally showing a hint of emotion:

"Oh? So you want me to join forces with the Great Clan Valor for the benefit of humanity? I see… you must be sincere, then. Surely, it has nothing to do with the impending war between the King of Swords and the Queen of Worms. Surely, it is not because your side wants to use me as a weapon in that war.

And, surely… you have no ambition to subjugate Godgrave with my help to gain control over the future battlefield."

The master of the dark temple chuckled again, and then said, his sinister voice growing even colder:

"You wouldn't be trying to deceive me, would you, Lady Changing Star?"

At the same time, the enormous creature hiding in the darkness shifted slightly, filling the great hall with the chilling sound of rustling scales.

Chapter-1614: Lord's Challenge

Sunny felt glad that his face was hidden behind Weaver's Mask and shrouded in impenetrable darkness. That was because he might not have controlled his expression very well in the last few minutes.

One of his other two avatars might have even stumbled out of nowhere, somewhere far away.

Those lazy guys…

Luckily, he regained his composure swiftly.

'Damn it, Neph…'

The echo of his last words was still traveling across the Nameless Temple when Nephis frowned slightly. Sunny had just accused her of trying to deceive him in a rather threatening tone… he even commanded Serpent to make a bit of noise to add some weight to his perceived displeasure.

What would her reaction be?

Unexpectedly, a subtle smile bloomed on Neph's face, and her eyes gleamed with satisfaction.

"I see that you are better informed than I presumed, Lord Shadow. Good. That saves me a lot of trouble."

Sunny was stunned for a moment. That… was not the reaction he had expected.

'Shameless! She's completely shameless!'

Nephis, meanwhile, put her hand on the hilt of her sword and looked up a little.

"Since you already know that the war is inevitable, and that it will happen here in Godgrave, you must also realize that you can't escape it. One way or the other, you will be implicated in the clash between the two Domains. So… unless you want to abandon your Citadel and flee into the waking world, you might as well choose a side. In fact, I think that you already have."

Sunny scowled, staring at her with displeasure.

'How the hell does she know?'

Of course, he had intended to insinuate his way into a high position of the Sword Domain's army from the very start. That was why he had established the Nameless Temple in Godgrave and waited for the emissaries of Valor to take the bait.

But Nephis had no way of guessing that.

Sunny shook his head in the darkness and asked, keeping his voice devoid of emotions:

"Have I?"

Nephis nodded.

"You must have. After all, you have already refused the emissary of Clan Song. Since you have shown no desire to join the other side, only one choice remains. It's us."

Sunny remained silent for a while.

Then, grabbing the armrests of his throne, he leaned forward and asked, his voice suffused with an insidious undertone:

"Says who?"

She stared into the darkness with a hint of confusion on her beautiful alabaster face.

"What?"

Sunny smiled.

"Who said that I refused the emissary of Clan Song? I did not."

Which was, of course, a lie. He could not say a word of truth while wearing Weaver's Mask, and this avatar of his almost never took it off. The Lord of Shadows was meant to attract the attention of those with great power, after all, all the while keeping Sunny's secrets safe.

This time, however, it had worked to his advantage.

Neph's expression remained the same, but he could feel the pressure she exerted growing sharper. Right now, she was probably considering whether the Nameless Temple was a death trap. With Saint and Fiend behind her, the path to escape was cut off. In front of her were Sunny and the Soul Serpent.

Nightmare and the shapeless guardian of the temple were close, as well.

Nevertheless, Nephis maintained her composure. Facing the wall of impenetrable darkness in front of her, she asked calmly:

"You didn't?"

Sunny sighed quietly and leaned back.

From here onward… he had to sell himself to Nephis while making her think that she was the one insisting on making the purchase. People did not value that which came into their possession too easily, after all. If Sunny wanted to be treated as a precious ally instead of a cheap tool, he had to make Clan Valor think that they had been extremely lucky to gain his support.

He remained silent for a moment.

"I did not refuse the generous offer of the illustrious Clan Song. However… perhaps I didn't accept it, either. Instead, I gave the emissary Ki Song sent a chance to win my allegiance. I despise the idea of fighting side by side with those weaker than me, you see."

Sunny smiled.

"So, I'll give you the same chance, Lady Changing Star. If any of you,

emissaries of Valor, manage to leave a scratch on my armor, I'll accept your proposal. What do you say?"

Nephis did not answer immediately, contemplating his offer. Eventually, she asked:

"A duel? Which one of us do you want to fight?"

He chuckled.

"Any of you, all of you… it doesn't matter. I won't even use my Aspect. Instead, I'll crush you with pure skill."

A corner of Neph's mouth twisted upward.

"...Arrogant."

Sunny laughed, noticing the Fire Keepers tremble at the cold sound of his sinister laughter.

"Arrogant? Oh, on the contrary… I am being modest."

He was in a strangely good mood. The truth of the matter was… that Sunny missed the feeling of fighting against humans. He had very few opportunities to fight a proper duel in recent years.

The deadly reaches of the Dream Realm he had explored were full of all kinds of harrowing Nightmare Creatures. He had faced and killed countless abominations, coming very close to being killed by them instead on numerous occasions.

Those battles had been fierce, terrible, painful… and sometimes exhilarating.

But the exhilaration of facing a dreadful monster was different from the joy and delight of facing a skilled human opponent in battle. The artistry of combat was lost on most Nightmare Creatures.

The Fire Keepers, though… Sunny knew these people well. Each of them was a brilliant fighter. Even though they were mere Masters, if he held back a little, clashing with them promised to be very satisfying.

And then, of course… there was Nephis herself. A genius swordsman who had taken the legacy left behind by her legendary father, Broken Sword, and elevated it to new heights.

His former teacher, rival, and partner.

How could Sunny not feel excited at the thought of crossing swords with her again?

As he was thinking about that, Nephis stared into the darkness for a few moments, and then nodded decisively.

"...Alright. I accept."

Chapter-1615: Grand Entrance

There was movement in the darkness.

Nephis could not see it, but she felt the shadows that drowned the great hall of the ancient temple shift and surge, as if celebrating the arrival of their master. The Fire Keepers behind her tensed, looking up with somber expressions.

Thud.

A heavy sound resounded, followed by another. It seemed that someone was descending from an unseen dais, the weight of their unhurried footsteps echoing in the lightless hall like an ill omen.

Suddenly, the enchanted lanterns ignited with bright radiance, chasing away the darkness. As if they were finally allowed to shine.

As soon as they did, a dark figure stepped into the light, the shadows shrouding it like a mantle.

Even Nephis, who rarely felt fear, sensed a slight chill at the sight of the Lord of Shadows. She didn't quite know why.

The man in front of her was as elusive as his voice. His figure was encased in a fearsome onyx armor, its polished surface glistening like black glass. His features were hidden behind a mask of a fierce demon, nothing but darkness dwelling in the narrow slits of its eyes… as if there was no human face behind the mask, and no human flesh beneath the intricate black armor.

Just a formless shadow.

Strangely enough, Nephis could not say how tall the man was, exactly. But it felt as if he dwarfed everyone in the ancient temple, looking down at them with cold, malevolent arrogance.

…He was unarmed.

Nephis studied the Lord of Shadows calmly.

[Cassie?]

The blind seer answered after a moment of silence:

[I can see him through your eyes. But I still can't sense him. It's like there's nothing but emptiness where a man should be.]

Nephis felt a bit dejected. It seemed that she had grown too used to enjoying the amazing boon of having Cassie serve as her eyes and ears. The great advantage of information superiority had spoiled her… this time, though, she would not be able to know what her opponent's Attributes, Abilities, and hidden cards were in advance.

Well, it was for the best, then, that Shadow had offered to duel her and the Fire Keepers. She would learn what he was capable of firsthand.

Showing no emotion, she looked at the fearsome Saint and took several unhurried steps back. At the same time, the Fire Keepers moved forward, facing him.

The Lord of Shadows tilted his head a little.

"What? You are not going to fight, Changing Star?"

His cold voice sounded almost… disappointed.

Nephis shook her head.

"You've challenged all of us, haven't you? But… I don't draw my sword for just anyone. Prove yourself first, Lord Shadow."

The unnerving black mask stared at her for a few moments, and then the elusive voice resounded once again, full of cold indifference:

"No matter. You, there… come all at once."

As he said these words, the Lord of Shadows raised a hand. The

darkness flowed from the floor, assuming a long and sinister shape. A few moments later, a great odachi formed from the shadows, its curving blade so black that it seemed to devour light.

Disturbed, the Fire Keepers moved forward.

***

Seven Fire Keepers…

Sunny remained calm, but he also felt a little tense. Of course, there was no question that he could crush a cohort of Masters without breaking a sweat, no matter how seasoned and talented they were.

But, how could he put it…

He might have allowed himself to be carried away, a little, while acting out the role of the cold and mysterious Lord of Shadows. Not only had he promised to avoid using his Aspect, but he also set a ridiculous condition for his loss.

Defeating the enemy was easy, but doing so while not receiving a single scratch on his armor was not.

Of course, Sunny had no intention of winning, to begin with. He just wanted to put on a good show and lose gracefully, thus laying the necessary groundwork for infiltrating the war machine of the Sword Domain.

However, the person he needed to impress was Nephis. And now, he had to deal with the Fire Keepers first to cross swords with her.

'Should I cheat?'

He considered the idea for a moment, then discarded it. That would not be any fun.

Sunny studied the seven Masters that were surrounding him.

Shim, Shakti, Kaor, Sid, Gorn, Gantry, and Erlas.

He knew them well.

Shim, a young man wielding a shield and a spear, was the healer who led the cohort. Strangely enough, he was also the most skilled and lethal warrior among them — that was because, back on the Forgotten Shore, he had been one of Gemma's Pathfinders. An elite who had survived countless hunts in the Dark City.

Gorn, Gantry, and Erlas had been among the Hunters of the Bright Castle.

Gorn was tall, immensely strong, and possessed an Aspect that allowed him to manifest an additional pair of hands, preferring to use two greatswords in battle. Gantry usually fought with a heavy battle axe, and was able to sharpen his weapons with his Aspect Ability. Erlas was a skilled archer capable of enhancing the resilience and stamina of his allies.

Sid, a young woman with dirty blonde hair, had been a hunter in the outer settlement. The fact that she had survived there was a testament to her skill and tenacity, and her Aspect greatly augmented her physical strength in short, but devastating bursts. She was armed with a sword and a shield.

Finally, there were Shakti and Kaor. Both had been Artisans in the Bright Castle, possessing potent Utility Aspects — Shakti's had to do with plants, while Kaor's had to do with carpentry. The former was a deadly archer, as well, while the latter was a jack-of-all-trades who usually guarded the rear of the cohort.

All seven were elites even among Masters, and their ability to work together was second to none.

Placing the odachi that he had manifested from the shadows on his shoulder, Sunny smiled behind his mask.

'This… is going to be fun.'

Chapter-1616: Blade of Shadows

Sunny had never stopped fighting, sharpening his mastery of combat to a sublime level. He had already been one of the most seasoned warriors of humanity four years ago… mostly because very few had it as rough as he had it on the Forgotten Shore and in the Antarctic Center.

But the last four years had not been easy on him, either. Crossing the Hollow Mountains alone had given him more battle experience than most Awakened would receive in their lifetime. So, now, he had a solid reason to be supremely confident in his ability.

That said, there was a difference between fighting Nightmare Creatures and fighting humans. Sunny had mostly been doing the former recently, so the latter… he was a bit rusty.

As the Fire Keepers surrounded him, Sunny observed them silently.

Now that they were Masters, each possessed one additional Aspect Ability. Gorn not only had four arms, but also expanded in size, towering above the floor at almost three meters in height. Gantry seemed to have augmented his body, somehow… making it more durable? More nimble? Or simply more powerful?

He was going to find out shortly.

Erlas, meanwhile, was enhancing the physical state of each member of the cohort. His powers had been mainly focused on endurance and stamina before… what about now?

Sid was bound to do something unpredictable, as well.

Shim, Shakti, and Kaor all possessed non-combat Aspect, so guessing their powers was of less importance. Still… they could be full of surprises.

There were the Memories the Fire Keepers wielded to consider, as well.

'Ah…'

Sunny felt a pang of regret for setting such strict restrictions for himself.

But, still… he was looking forward to it.

A real clash of skill, cunning, and competence.

He had missed it a lot.

"What are you waiting for?"

Before the echo of his cold voice had time to disappear, the Fire Keepers attacked. The two archers opened the battle, instantly letting two arrows loose. They were showing decorum, too — since it was a friendly duel, his opponents refrained from using truly destructive Memories inside the Citadel.

Sunny did not augment himself with any of his three shadows. Being a Transcendent already gave him a great advantage as far as physical prowess and the intricacy of essence control went, so it was unnecessary.

Shifting slightly, he dodged both arrows with the minimum effort. One seemed to possess a homing enchantment, turning sharply to strike him in the back, but was tossed aside by the flat of the black odachi's blade.

At that moment, the melee fighters of the Ascended cohort were already upon him. They coordinated their attacks seamlessly, using the arrow salvo to cover their advance.

'Perfect teamwork.'

Shim and Sid were the spearheads aimed at his chest and back. Gorn and Gantry, who wielded longer weapons and had a wider reach, attacked from behind them at the same time.

There was a ceiling to a numerical advantage, since space was limited and only a few people could target a single opponent simultaneously… but by using this simple formation, the Fire Keepers effortlessly increased that limit.

There was no way for Sunny to block and deflect four attacks that came from different directions with a single sword.

So, he didn't. Instead, he removed himself from the path of the enemy weapons, deflecting Shim's spear and Gantry's heavy axe in the process. Using explosive footwork, Sunny escaped the encirclement and used the bodies of the Fire Keepers to block their comrades from chasing after him.

Then, he lashed out with a probing attack.

Sharp steel sang in the dark expanse of the Nameless Temple.

'Interesting…'

Sunny's smile widened under Weaver's Mask. The Fire Keepers… had not wasted these four years, either. He had known that Valor had used Nephis and her personal battle force like a sledgehammer, endlessly sending them to put out one fire after another. It was almost as if they were being repeatedly sent to death, but stubbornly refused to die. As a result, their lethality reached chilling levels.

Of course, he could have crushed them easily if he wished to. The gap between Saints and Masters was already vast, and Sunny was a singular existence even among Saints, to boot.

But with the limitations he had put on himself, the Fire Keepers were a challenging adversary. Especially because he could not allow himself to be hit even once.

Plus, he had chosen to only use a single battle style against them… Morgan's own battle style, to be precise. The sharp, deadly, and ruthless technique she used was representative of how warriors of Valor fought — not even becoming one with their weapons, but instead treating themselves as weapons.

So, it wasn't easy.

It was exhilarating, though.

'Damnation. More!'

There were a few tense moments when the unexpected facets of the Ascended Abilities of his enemies revealed themselves. There were several interesting enchantments their Memories possessed, as well.

But Sunny still managed to evade, block, or deflect all their attacks in the most efficient and economical manner. He didn't make any big moves, using the least amount of motion possible in every situation.

And all the while, he was studying how the Fire Keepers fought.

Solving their battle styles and their teamwork like a puzzle.

And when that puzzle was solved…

The dynamic of the battle changed abruptly.

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The Lord of Shadows was indeed like a shadow. Swift, elusive, and insidious, he moved across the black marble of the great hall with stunning speed and flawless precision, effortlessly deflecting the rain of blows that the Fire Keepers unleashed upon him.

His black odachi seemed to have a life of its own, flowing like a stream of darkness. A weapon of that length was supposed to be if not unwieldy, then at least less maneuverable than a shorter blade… and yet, the odachi was always exactly where it needed to be, effectively creating an impenetrable barrier of steel around its cold-hearted master.

It was not because of his speed, strength, or mystical power. Instead… it was pure foresight and pure skill, both sharpened and tempered until they became a lethal weapon.

Nephis observed the movements of the Lord of Shadows silently.

The Fire Keepers, who had gone through countless battles by her side, fought well. They fought bravely. They fought with great skill

and cunning, proving that their glorious fame was well-earned.

And yet, she had guessed the result of the duel almost as soon as it started.

Soon, the cadence of the battle shifted. The Lord of Shadows, who had been defending against the barrage of attacks, suddenly abandoned all pretenses of defense. Instead, he easily shrugged off a squall of steel and moved through it, attacking the Fire Keepers before they could even react.

It was almost as if he was dancing...

The black odachi hissed like a snake as it cut the air.

It struck Shim in the chest, sending him flying back. A split second later, Sid's shield was pushed aside, and her breastplate caved as the young woman toppled with a short yelp. Gantry was struck by the pommel of the odachi almost at the same moment, swaying once before falling down. By the time his back hit the floor, Gorn was already on his knees, both of his greatswords sliding away.

The Lord of Shadows was among them. A moment later, he had already reached the two archers.

"Crap…"

Kaor, who was supposed to protect them, was tossed back with one unhurried blow of the demonic swordsman's fist. Shakti and Erlas attempted to retreat, but both were sent to the ground before taking a single step.

From start to finish, the duel between the Lord of Shadows and the Fire Keepers had taken a couple of minutes.

However, they had all been defeated in just two seconds.

It was as though the master of the ancient temple was telling them — look! I could have ended you all any time I wanted.

White sparks ignited in Neph's eyes.

'Beautiful.'

The Lord of Shadows stopped and calmly put the spine of the black odachi on his shoulder. His fearsome mask remained the same, eerie and devoid of any emotion. The Fire Keepers groaned as they slowly picked themselves up from the floor.

"Is that all?"

His voice was still the same, cold and impassive.

Nephis smiled slightly and finally unsheathed her sword.

"You haven't defeated all of us yet, have you?"

He tilted his head a little, staring at her with arrogant indifference.

Well… Nephis thought that those were his emotions. In truth, there was no way to know what was hiding behind that fearsome mask… if there was anything behind it at all.

The Lord of Shadows slowly lowered his odachi and gripped its hilt with both hands.

"Stop wasting my time, then."

Nephis took a step forward.

That mask…

Why did it look so familiar?

Chapter-1617: Duel of the Saints

Sunny held his odachi lightly as he watched Nephis take unhurried steps in his direction. The familiar white flames were dancing in her eyes…

But what was this?

As he walked, the same sparks ignited in the eyes of the seven Fire Keepers. A moment later, their bodies shone with a soft white radiance, and the bruises and contusions left on them by his restrained blows disappeared without a trace. Expressions of gratitude and relief appeared on their faces, and at the same time, Neph's own face grew colder.

'Since when can she heal others from a distance?'

Before he could consider the implications of that unexpected turn of events, her sword left the enchanted scabbard with a quiet murmur. Its mirror-like blade was as black as the night sky, the light of the magical lanterns reflecting in it like distant stars.

He knew that sword well… or rather, he had known it once.

The silver blade was a Transcendent Memory of the Seventh Tier Nephis had received after slaying Soul Stealer. It was a mighty weapon, and had been made mightier still by Sunny himself. He had transplanted a Supreme soul shard as one of its nodes, augmenting the fundamental enchantment of the silver blade.

But now, it was different.

Sunny frowned behind the mask when he noticed a familiar symbol branded into the mystical steel just above the crossguard. An anvil pierced through by a sword…

Had one of the forgemasters of the Clan Valor deemed themselves competent enough to improve on his own work? No, they wouldn't have been able to.

That left only one person, then.

The King of Swords himself.

'That bastard. Who gave him the right to taint the gift I gave her with his dirty hands?'

Suddenly, Sunny felt displeased.

And since he did, the shadows drowning the great hall of the Nameless Temple moved, overcome by the same displeasure.

The Fire Keepers, who had been retreating to give the two Saints space to fight, suddenly paled.

Nephis sensed the change in the atmosphere, too.

"What is the matter, Lord Shadow? Do you not wish to fight me?"

Sunny smiled darkly.

"...I am a peaceful man. I hate fighting."

As he said that, he lunged forward without any warning and thrust his odachi at Neph's throat. His sudden attack was violent and ruthless, aimed at slicing open her arteries and severing her spine.

Of course, Nephis deflected the black odachi easily, taking a sidestep in the opposite direction at the same time. Her movements flowed like a placid river, and yet Sunny instantly felt that he was in mortal danger.

The silver sword had pushed the blade of the odachi down just a split second ago, but was already flying forward. It was moving at a speed that could not be perceived by the Fire Keepers, and even Sunny struggled to sense its passing. Unable to pull his own sword back in time, he had no choice but to jump back.

The tip of the silver sword missed his chest by mere centimeters.

After that first exchange, Sunny and Nephis circled each other for a few moments.

Then, she suddenly spoke:

"The battle style you used. Only those trained by Valor are masters of it."

Tilting his head a little, Sunny responded coldly:

"My esteemed guests have been sent by the King of Swords. It only seemed polite to greet them by using the battle style of his knights."

The corner of Neph's mouth twitched subtly.

"Then what style would you have used if we were sent by Song?"

Sunny raised his odachi and took a step forward.

"Something like this."

A moment later, they were upon each other once more, their swords weaving a complicated web of attacks and deflections in the air. Both were moving with astonishing speed, exchanging dozens of blows in a second. The clangor of steel fused into a continuous wail that echoed in the darkness of the solemn hall, followed by a thunderous sonic boom.

A shockwave spread from the spot where the Lord of Shadows and the radiant Star of Ruin clashed, sending a cloud of dust rushing outward like an opaque sphere. The Fire Keepers reeled and staggered back.

'This is it… this is it!'

Straining his Transcendent body to its limit, Sunny was momentarily overcome by the exhilaration of combat. He had missed having someone to spar with, and dueling the Fire Keepers had not satisfied his thirst.

…Of course, the clash between him and Nephis was much more furious and destructive than the previous fight. After all… he was a Transcendent Terror, and she was a Transcendent Titan. Neither was using their Aspect to augment themselves, but their power was still terrible enough to devastate their surroundings.

Luckily, the Nameless Temple was very hard to destroy. It would not have remained standing from the dawn of the Age of Gods to this day otherwise… granted, Sunny had found it in a rather sorry state, and had to perform plenty of repairs to make this ancient Citadel presentable.

In any case, he wasn't worried that it would be seriously damaged… not unless either Nephis or him decided to unleash their full power.

'Now… how do I lose without having Nephis realize that I threw the fight…'

There were two problems.

First, Nephis was too good of a swordsman, so weaving any kind of pretense in front of her was not easy.

And secondly… Sunny was having too much fun.

He didn't want their fight to end so quickly.

'Shall… shall we make it more interesting, then?'

Grinning behind the mask, Sunny suddenly shifted his weight and switched to an entirely new technique. The battle style of Clan Valor was sharp, domineering, and fatal. But this new technique… it was flowing, unpredictable, and supremely adaptable.

It was the battle style taught to Nephis by her family, and then by Nephis to him.

'There. Finally!'

The mask of indifference that she wore finally cracked a little, and he could feel her blade waver for a split second.

That split second was all that Sunny needed.

Breaking through Neph's defense, he delivered a swift strike. And yet, no matter how swift his attack was, she still managed to compose herself and evade it by disengaging.

Nephis took a step back, and the tip of the black odachi hissed angrily past her breastplate, separated from the polished white steel by no more than a centimeter.

She lingered for a moment.

"...Who taught you that style?"

Her voice was even, but Sunny knew Nephis well enough to recognize a somber undertone within it.

He pulled his odachi back and answered in an even tone:

"Nobody."

With that, Sunny lunged forward once again.

Chapter-1618: Transcendent Battle Art

What was a battle style?

Depending on the practitioner, the answer varied.

At the lowest level, a battle style was nothing more than a comprehensive collection of movements and steps aimed at giving the practitioner sufficient competence to engage in battle. A set of practices meant to encompass all possible combat situations, and arm the warrior with tools to solve them.

There were countless battle styles, some taught to groups of people, others formed from the personal habits and quirks of talented combatants. Some styles emphasized strength and strived to overpower the opponent, some emphasized speed and precision, some emphasized solid defense and waiting for a perfect moment to counterattack.

There were solid battle styles created with deep insight, and poor battle styles that were concocted without a real understanding of the fundamental laws of combat.

But that was only the most shallow layer of a true battle art. A person could practice a battle style without truly understanding its essence, but they would never be able to master it.

At a higher level, a battle style was not only a set of movements, but also a formative philosophy. It concerned not only the body, but also the mind. A person who truly mastered a style had to possess a certain level of insight into the governing laws of combat.

Knowing why each of the elements had been created and what its purpose was, they were not beholden to a predetermined repertoire

of actions. Instead, they could freely improvise an actionable response to each situation.

If all movements could be improvised, then what was the difference between the various battle styles? It was their philosophy. The school of thought and the dominant intent, a unifying principle that guided the shape and direction of these improvised moves.

Therefore, even among those practitioners who had mastered both the body and the mind, there were still those who fought with domineering strength, swift precision, patient caution, or any other type of guiding intent.

These were the true masters of combat.

Sunny had become one of them — and one of the absolute best among them — a long time ago.

But now that he was a Saint, a whole new horizon had opened up before him.

Because there was a third layer above the body and the mind, available only to a few chosen existences.

It was soul.

'She has changed…'

While clashing with Nephis in a ferocious dance of steel, Sunny couldn't help but feel amazed. She had always been a true genius of the sword, and since he knew her better than anyone, he had expected this fight to be a tough one.

After all, just like him, Nephis had four long years to perfect her technique. As the vanguard champion of Valor, she had gone through countless battles. She had also come into her Transcendent power, learning to wield it as naturally as she breathed.

A Saint was a different kind of beast, and the difference between them and their lessers was not only a question of raw power. Sunny had already glimpsed that chasm when he and Nephis fought Dire Fang, but only now that he was a Transcendent himself did he truly

understand the reason it existed.

The further a human walked on the Path of Ascension, the more intricate their control of soul essence became. Masters were already very proficient in using it to deliberately and efficiently augment their bodies in combat, but Saints were capable of elevating these rudimentary essence techniques to a completely new level.

Therefore, a comprehensive essence technique was an integral part of a truly transcendent battle art. And since each Transcendent warrior possessed a unique Aspect, each essence technique had to be tailor-made for a single user. The difference that mastering such a technique could make was truly striking, and therefore, that alone made Saints vastly more deadly on the battlefield.

But that was not the end of it.

Since each transcendent battle art was unique and tailored to a single user, there was an additional step to be taken. And that was to seamlessly incorporate each Aspect Ability into the combat technique, making it truly complete.

A transcendent battle art demanded the complete integration of body, mind, and soul into a combat technique.

...Losing his True Name made it much harder for Sunny to advance in mastering Shadow Dance, so he had been concentrating on developing such a personal transcendent battle art for himself in the past four years. He had already formulated its principles, and was now tempering these principles in battles against powerful opponents.

And, in the process of it…

He thought that he might have glimpsed what the next level of mastery was.

Saints did not exist in and of themselves, as sovereign beings. Their souls were vaster than their bodies, coming into contact with the world and the underlying laws governing it. Some parts of the world welcomed them, while others repelled them. That was why

Transcendent beings were able to absorb the spirit essence of the world, as long as they were in their element.

For Sunny, that element was shadow. For someone like Saint Tyris, it was the sky, or perhaps storm clouds. For someone like Nephis… he couldn't guess. It might have been light, or flame, or something more esoteric, like inspiring longing in the souls of other beings.

Therefore… he guessed that what came after the body, the mind, and the souls was the world. Incorporating the world itself into one's battle art would probably make it a supreme battle art. That said, Sunny was not sure if it could even be called a battle art, at that point, let alone how to actually achieve something like that.

In any case, he was voraciously curious to witness and experience the battle styles of other Transcendent warriors. To learn from them, and maybe even gain more understanding about the path to supremacy.

Which was why fighting Nephis was a boon to him.

So… he definitely wasn't prolonging their clash simply because he missed her.

Why would he cut this duel short if humanity's premier sword savant was graciously allowing him to steal her achievements?

'I see… I see. No, I don't see…'

Deflecting a barrage of almost instantaneous attacks, and at the same time desperately preventing these attacks from dictating his next moves to avoid the countless traps Nephis constructed for him on the fly, Sunny carefully observed her movements, the flow of her essence, and the form of her shadow.

Pretty soon, he had to admit something to himself...

'What the hell has she been doing for the last four years? It's… damn incomprehensible!'

Chapter-1619: Essence Technique

Sliding across the marble floor as he was being pushed back by a merciless onslaught of unhurried, but lethal attacks, Sunny was carefully observing Neph's movements.

'Why can't I make sense of it?'

He shifted his weight, deflected the silver blade to the side, and used the long hilt of the odachi as a lever to spin its blade at an inconceivable speed. Nephis easily parried it with the crossguard of her sword, but Sunny was already transitioning from a downward slash into a rising stab.

Every movement flowed into another, forming a torrent of deadly steel.

'How strange.'

Nephis was the first person Sunny had ever shadowed. After years of training together and fighting side by side, he knew her better than anyone else. Therefore, it should have been easy to glimpse the true essence of her transcendent battle art, or at least start to unravel it.

And indeed, Sunny sensed the heart of her intent. Just like how Nephis could read his intentions through her sublime mastery of combat, he could predict her actions through Shadow Dance. But his perception was oddly shallow… he could guess what would happen, but not why it would happen.

Almost like those initiates who had only mastered the body, but not the mind.

Nephis evaded his stab by turning and leaning sideways, took a

graceful step to shift her balance, and pulled her blade out of the bind. A split second later, it lashed out, almost striking his thigh. If Sunny was a beat too late, he would have had to receive her blow.

The Onyx Mantle was akin to a Transcendent armor, while the mirror sword was a strange hybrid between a Transcendent and a Supreme weapon that he himself had created. Considering that offense usually trampled defense in the ruthless world of the Nightmare Spell, a single strike was all it would take for him to lose the duel.

The silver blade might not break his armor immediately, but leaving a scratch on its onyx surface would be easy.

He disengaged and stared at Nephis impassively for a moment.

Apart from manifesting this avatar, Sunny was not using his Aspect. She had not promised to do the same, technically, but was still following suit. Whether it was out of respect for the Lord of Shadows or simply because Neph was just as starved for a good opponent as he was, Sunny did not know.

That was a part of the problem.

A transcendent battle art was tailored to a single user, seamlessly incorporating their unique traits and abilities. So, since Nephis was not using any of her Aspect Abilities, what Sunny was witnessing was not the true extent of her battle style, but rather a partial version of it.

Of course, he had hoped to extrapolate the missing pieces by experiencing the foundational technique, but it was not going well.

'Should I try to deduce what's missing?'

Sunny had plenty of experience constructing his own battle art, so it was not impossible for him to guess what Nephis would have created.

'Let's see…'

The basic principle of elevating a battle style to a transcendent battle art was universal… at least it was supposed to be. Sunny had not consulted any Saints on how they built their personal techniques, so

he did not know if everyone followed what he perceived to be common sense.

The first step was to create a comprehensive essence technique. By infusing one's body with essence, one was capable of greatly enhancing their physical prowess. Awakened could not control essence with finesse, so their way of going about things was crude and rudimentary, mostly consisting of flooding the entirety of their bodies with essence.

Masters were much more skilled in that regard. Their control of essence was rather intricate, as was their understanding of the human body. By selectively infusing various areas, muscle groups, and organs with essence at just the right time, they were able to not only increase its efficacy, but also drastically reduce its consumption, thus raising efficiency.

But Saints could control soul essence as naturally as they were breathing, and with truly incredible finesse. They could more or less selectively enhance each muscle fiber, nerve cluster, or tendon in their body — not only that, but due to better control, the range and manner of these enhancements were broader than those of a Master, and could be consciously altered.

In short, Saints could explosively increase their already stunningly formidable strength, speed, agility, and resilience if they were smart about using their essence, and had trained themselves to do it instinctively… like Sunny had in the past four years.

Each time he took a step or delivered a strike, the complex machine of his body performed numerous actions. His heart pumped blood through his veins, electrical impulses traveled along his nerves, various muscles relaxed or contracted, and so on. To perform a proper strike, a warrior had to possess great control of his body and know how to use it well.

Of course, no one consciously willed all these minute processes to happen. If trained properly, the body itself would remember how to act to the best of its ability.

An essence technique, therefore, was like an additional layer on top

of physical training, designed to augment every motion in the most effective and efficient way, as well as tailored to the unique personal battle style of the individual. Designing such a technique demanded immense insight into the functions of the body, the laws of combat, and one's own self.

At first, including his soul in the movements of his body was a conscious process, and one that demanded an inconceivable amount of concentration, at that. But by now, it was like an instinct to Sunny — luckily, he had possessed a rich foundation of going through countless battles as an Awakened and a Master to build upon, so mastering his essence technique had not been too hard.

There had been the Soul Serpent and Soul Weave to assist him, as well.

…Similarly, Nephis had designed an essence technique of her own. Sunny could perceive her radiant, pure soul essence flowing through her body with a strange and almost hypnotic elegance, moving in perfect harmony with the fluid grace of her sword dance.

Her technique seemed even more intricate and precise than his own… was it simply because Neph's swordsmanship had a different personality than his, or because she had spent more time to thoroughly comprehend the science behind the biology of her body and the physics of her sword?

After all, Sunny had mostly taught himself through practical experience and intuition, spending less time on theory.

In any case, this shallow layer of Neph's battle art was not a mystery. Sunny had enough ability to perceive it, enough insight to dismantle it, and enough experience to reassemble it… even emulating it was not a problem, given enough time.

But that was what an essence technique represented — the most shallow and basic layer of a battle art.

The true essence hid much deeper, having to do with Aspect and Attributes. That was what Sunny had to deduce in order to remove the strange interference that prevented him from comprehending

Neph's elevated battle style.

There was another sonic boom, and the two of them were momentarily thrown away from each other. Sunny increased the weight of his body and slid several meters back, swiftly coming to a halt. Nephis pivoted on one leg and performed an effortless pirouette, regaining her balance almost immediately.

The Fire Keepers scrambled to get even further back, seemingly stunned by how long the duel was lasting.

Sunny smirked behind the mask and rushed forward.

'If I compare our Aspects…'

Chapter-1620: Deeper Layer

A transcendent battle art was meant to incorporate the user's Aspect into their combat technique. What did it mean for Sunny?

The first element he had to consciously and comprehensively integrate into his battle style was the easiest — it was his ability to perceive the movement through shadows, as well as see what was happening behind his back. That did not sound like much, compared to his other abilities, but was actually a drastic change.

Almost every battle style he had learned in the past was meant to be practiced by humans, after all, and humans only had two eyes. That naturally dictated how they fought, and how the masters who taught young warriors to wield weapons constructed their styles.

However, Sunny was not beholden to these standards. Therefore, he had spent plenty of time relearning the very basics of combat, building his technique in a way that allowed him to fully utilize that subtle, but confounding advantage.

The second element was even more fundamental, since it concerned movement. Movement lay at the base of every battle style… footwork was just as indispensable as striking and defending, if not more so. Not only did it dictate the balance and strength available to a fighter, but it also controlled space.

Advancing and retreating, evading and pressing the opponent — both offense and defense relied on controlling space. Sunny was not beholden to space, either, because he was supremely mobile due to Shadow Step.

That was perhaps his greatest advantage in a battle, and therefore, he meticulously altered his way of thinking about space in accordance with this advantage, practically rebuilding his battle style around it.

The third element was… group battle. It was a strange matter, considering that Sunny was both an individual and possessed multiple bodies.

Back on the Forgotten Shore, he and Nephis had been able to slay Carapace Scavengers by acting together — one served as bait, another delivered a fatal blow from behind. That simple manner of teamwork illustrated perfectly why the boon of fighting in a group was not additive, but instead multiplicative. The sum was greater than its parts, and Sunny alone… had seven parts.

So, he had trained himself relentlessly to fight while controlling many bodies at the same time, learning how to efficiently use group tactics without anyone's help.

The fourth element had to do with Blood Weave and Bone Weave. Most living things were hard to kill unless you aimed at their vital points, and due to these two Attributes, Sunny lacked several vulnerabilities that most humans possessed. He wouldn't bleed to death even if his artery was sliced open, and his bones were immensely resilient, to the point that breaking them was almost impossible.

Therefore, he had to teach himself how to make use of these traits. It was the simplest, but also the hardest mindset alteration he had to absorb — because it went against his most powerful instinct, the instinct of self-preservation. Nevertheless, Sunny had succeeded in changing his behavior in a manner that allowed him to strategically sacrifice non-vital parts of himself.

The fifth element was about another Attribute of his, the Onyx Shell. Among other things, it allowed Sunny to freely change his weight… or was it mass? He could never tell the difference.

In any case, such an ability opened up a vast ocean of possibilities for a skilled warrior, from increasing the impact of his blows to greatly augmenting his speed, solidifying his balance, and even performing actions that would otherwise be impossible without toppling like a cut tree.

Sunny had incorporated the effects of the [Feather of Truth] trait of

the Onyx Shell into his battle style a while ago, but since he had had nothing but time in the last four years, he took this opportunity to fully reconsider it, learning how to use it not only comprehensively, but also instinctually.

Now, he did not even have to think about utilizing that adaptable trait to enhance his every move.

The sixth element was the most broad, and concerned Shadow Manifestation. Sunny had the ability to manifest endless variations of tangible shadows, roughly divided into two methods. The first was to summon external implements like shadow hands or chains… this method was destructive, but lost too much of its potency in battles against truly powerful opponents.

As such, it was best used against large groups of weaker foes, or for pure utility.

The second method was to alter the shape of his body with manifested shadows, from summoning additional limbs to building towering Shadow Shells. The shape of the Shells Sunny could create was, theoretically, endless — so, it was hard to pinpoint exactly how he was supposed to incorporate this method into his battle art.

However, in practice, his repertoire of Shells was currently limited. Since Sunny did not possess a True Name anymore, there was nothing to anchor his self, and therefore, assuming the shapes of alien creatures was extremely dangerous — unless he wished to lose himself entirely. So, he only used a handful of Shells. In exchange, these Shells had been perfected by him to a stellar degree.

Currently, he was slowly translating his battle art to each of these Shells.

And finally, there was the seventh element… or rather, there wasn't.

Sunny did not know what the last element of his transcendent battle art would be, but suspected that once he mastered it, his technique would become a supreme battle art.

'Wishful thinking…'

Sunny and Nephis clashed in another exchange, the silver sword and the black odachi howling as they repeatedly attracted and repelled each other. A few seconds later, the two Saints disengaged and spent a moment to realign themselves.

He frowned behind the mask.

The odachi he had manifested from a wild shadow was infused with his Transcendent essence, which in turn was made more potent by Soul Weave. So, it was akin to a Transcendent weapon, and a powerful one at that. The odachi had held up well against Neph's quasi-Supreme longsword.

But just then, he had felt a crack forming along the length of its blade. The odachi was not going to last much longer… Sunny could easily repair it, of course, but doing so would mean breaking his promise to abstain from using his Aspect.

More than that, he would be cheating — it wasn't a coincidence that his weapon was failing, after all. Instead, it was the result of Nephis consciously targeting the same spot on the dark blade over and over again, without him noticing.

'How devious…'

Sunny couldn't help but smile.

Nephis might have forgotten her teacher, but it seemed like she remembered the lessons.

This duel of theirs would have to come to an end shortly.

It was a shame.

He didn't attack, this time, waiting for her to come to him.

'Can I understand what is wrong before the duel is over?'

If Sunny remembered his own considerations when elevating his battle style to a transcendent art, he could try to imagine what Nephis had done.

What elements did her battle art consist of, apart from the essence technique?

Her Aspect was much more straightforward than his. Sunny had a wide array of traits and abilities that made him a jack-of-all-trades, skirting the line between combat prowess and utility, but leaning slightly more toward the latter.

Of the other two Divine Aspects he knew of, Mordret's was pure utility with hardly any battle application. Neph's, on the contrary, was all about combat prowess and destructiveness.

So, how would she have altered her battle style after becoming a Saint?

[Longing] was not applicable in combat, so it shouldn't have affected anything. The ability to control fire was probably similar to the first method of using Shadow Manifestation, mostly needed when facing swarms of weak abominations, or maybe enemy fortifications.

The most obvious change would, of course, have to do with her Transformation Ability. She must have developed a robust technique for aerial combat, where there was no ground to stand upon and therefore no footwork, with a completely different relationship between mass, force, counterforce, and impact. She would have also paid more attention to archery, using it against enemies on the ground.

Sunny was less knowledgeable about the two forms Nephis could assume apart from the winged one, so he couldn't even start to guess what her combat approach would be in those states.

The most important change, however, had to be about her very first Ability… the wondrous ability to heal herself. Just like Sunny had to rethink his relationship with physical harm due to Blood Weave and Bone Weave, Nephis would have forced herself to change the way she fought in accordance with her own inconceivable vitality.

Sunny had seen her destroy the vessel of the Skinwalker after having her neck broken. In Twilight, Soul Stealer had delivered her a thousand fatal wounds, and yet, that wasn't enough to stop her.

Scarily enough, if one thought about it... Nephis was nearly undying.

He did not know what it would take to fully destroy her, and hoped that he would never find out. However… ever since the battle in Twilight, it felt as though Nephis had come to terms with her chilling power. If she had incorporated it into her battle art…

What would it feel like, to fight against a nearly-indestructible enemy?

Someone who would continue to fight despite being pierced by your weapon, could sacrifice a limb to wound you and then immediately restore it, could not be slowed down even by the most gruesome injuries, was too accustomed to harrowing pain to care about it, would not bleed to death… and simply would not die before killing you?

He shivered slightly.

'Not unsolvable, but definitely frightening.'

Yes… she had to have rebuilt her battle style around that dreadful Ability of hers, disregarding the torturous curse of her Flaw.

There was another element Sunny had to consider, though.

Neph's Aspect Legacy. The tree with seven branches, each bearing fruits of knowledge. She had mastered one, [Knowledge of Fire], in Twilight. Had she mastered others after that?

Was there a way to incorporate the Sorcery of Names into a battle art?

He defended against her increasingly violent assault, contemplating.

But even after coming up with all these guesses, Sunny simply couldn't comprehend her battle art. It was just too strange, making no sense, as if something was interfering with his ability to understand it.

Stumped, he remembered the first time he had tried to shadow Nephis… long before he even knew what it meant to shadow

someone.

It had happened on the Forgotten Shore, when they were traveling toward the Hollow Mountains. Back then, Nephis and Caster were sparring with each other, and Sunny sent his shadow to observe her.

That was how he had received a revelation that resulted in Shadow Dance, to begin with.

Ironically, Nephis had not even used her most precious battle style in the spar against Caster. Since she knew that he had been sent to kill her, she guarded her true skill against him, showing a different and less lethal technique instead.

…Sunny eyes suddenly widened slightly behind the mask.

'No way.'

But, at that moment, he finally understood why he was having so much trouble. In hindsight, it was pretty obvious why he couldn't peer into the secrets of Neph's transcendent battle art.

...It was because she wasn't showing it, to begin with. Instead, she was deceiving everyone with a lesser, fabricated version of it.

Was it for his benefit? No, not likely. She was probably fooling the entirety of Valor with this splendid performance. After all, despite being one of the most renowned champions of the Great Clan Valor… she was ultimately its most insidious enemy.

Sunny suppressed a grin.

'As expected. Ah, my curiosity is thoroughly satisfied.'

Nephis was not using her Aspect, and on top of that, she had created a whole fake transcendent battle art to deceive her enemies. Therefore, trying to learn its secrets was of no real benefit to Sunny.

He felt his odachi slowly coming undone and sighed.

'Shall we end this duel, then?'

Chapter-1621: Princes of the Universe

By then, the Fire Keepers had almost retreated to the entrance of the ancient temple. The darkness seethed and surged, disturbed by the fearsome clash of the two Transcendent champions.

Both Changing Star and the man who called himself Shadow were beyond powerful. A Saint was like a natural disaster, and even though neither of them had called upon the dreadful power of their Aspects, the devastating physical might of two Transcendent warriors was more than enough to obliterate their surroundings, reshape the landscape, and instill terror in the hearts of countless people.

Luckily, both their lady and the master of the ancient temple seemed to be holding back. Otherwise, the Citadel might have been severely damaged by their duel.

Lady Nephis was clad in a suit of knightly armor that had been forged from sublime white steel and adorned with golden accents. With her fair skin and silver hair, pure flames dancing in her eyes, she was like a spirit of light.

Lord of Shadows, meanwhile, was like a devil born from pure darkness. His ominous onyx armor, demonic mask, and raven-black hair fused with the lightless void of the great hall, making it hard to discern where his figure ended and the shadows began.

The silence had long been torn apart by the melodic disharmony of clashing steel.

But… wasn't something very strange?

One of the Fire Keepers, Sid, looked at their leader and asked after hesitating for a few moments:

"Why… is he still standing?"

Her somber voice was hiding a note of bewilderment.

The seven of them had followed Lady Changing Star to storm the Crimson Spire, across the frozen hell of East Antarctica, and into countless battles after that. In the past four years, they had seen her turn hordes of abominations to ash, topple titans, and bring every Saint who dared challenge her to their knees. Only a few people could claim to be her equal, and even they did not dare to.

How was it that the Lord of Shadows had not only persisted for so long, but also seemed… to be holding his own in a duel against the last daughter of the Immortal Flame?

"Who the hell is he?"

Shim, the leader of the cohort, shook his head slightly without looking away from the barely perceptible whirlwind of the stunning clash.

"Watch carefully."

Out there in front of them, the cadence of the duel finally changed.

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'Now?'

Sunny delivered a lightning-fast strike, the air parting in front of the blade of his odachi with a wailing hiss. The strike was just a feint, turning into a thrust, turning into a downward slash.

Nephis ignored the feint, deflected the stab, and strangled the slash by binding their swords. She pushed him and shifted her body to gain an advantage in the follow-up attack.

Sunny was forced to take a step back, which would have landed him in an awkward position and made it impossible to mount a stable defense… if he did not increase the weight of his armored boots while at the same time decreasing the weight of his breastplate.

With his center of gravity lowered, he had enough stability to block Neph's calm and vicious attack without staggering back.

But even though he blocked it, she unerringly struck the exact same spot where his odachi had already been weakened.

Finally, the shadow blade shattered, exploding into a rain of shards. Those shards almost instantly turned ethereal, dissolving back into an intangible shadow.

The force behind Neph's strike was so terrible that her sword continued to fall down like an executioner's axe. Sunny, who had expected something like that to happen, was prepared and dodged the mirror blade just in time. It struck the black marble plate of the temple's floor, sending a net of cracks running through it.

Dust and pieces of stone flew into the air.

Without wasting a heartbeat, Nephis shifted into a low stance and delivered a rising diagonal slash.

However, Sunny was already moving by then.

Instead of retreating, he took a step forward and found himself almost face-to-face with her.

Silver clashed against stonelike metal with a thunderous clangor.

Both of them grew still.

...As the dust settled, the Fire Keepers saw a bewildering scene.

Sunny and Nephis were standing motionlessly, with almost no space between them. His right hand was gripping the hilt of her sword, which had been stopped a mere centimeter away from the onyx surface of his fearsome armor.

Her right hand, meanwhile, was gripping his left wrist. Held in his left hand was the hilt of the broken odachi, the jagged steel of its broken blade stopped several centimeters away from her neck.

Sunny remained still for a few moments, then looked down, at the

cracked floor beneath them.

A somber sigh escaped from his lips.

"...Let us stop here. Otherwise, my Citadel will sustain irreparable damage."

He allowed the broken odachi to dissolve into shadows, let go of Neph's hand, and took a step back, turning away with cold indifference.

As Sunny was walking back to his unseen throne, Nephis called out to him:

"What about the duel? We have not determined the winner yet."

He stopped, facing away from her.

After a few moments of silence, Sunny spoke:

"I'm willing to admit defeat."

He lingered for a bit, then turned around and stared at her. His voice turned even colder:

"However… I have no interest in joining forces with the Great Clan Valor, Nephis of the Immortal Flame."

He tilted his head a little:

"I'm only joining forces with you. You personally, not your clan and not your kingdom"

These statements were technically both a truth and a lie. Sunny might have preferred to deal with Nephis, and Nephis alone, but doing so was tantamount to joining Anvil's side.

Still, it at least allowed him to get his point across despite the [Simple Trick].

'I feel like… wearing this mask around people will quickly grow annoying.'

He suppressed a sigh.

Nephis looked at him for a while, then said evenly:

"My personal wealth is not that vast. I can't promise you the same boons and riches that my clan can."

Sunny chuckled. Considering the kind of atmosphere he had created, his laughter sounded sinister even without him trying.

When he responded, his voice was as cold as ice:

"I don't desire riches. Resources, assistance, powerful Memories and Echoes, soul shards… why should I want to get them from Clan Valor? I don't lack anything. If there's something I want, I can go and take it myself."

Nephis frowned slightly.

"So what is it that you want from me, Lord Shadow?"

Sunny turned away again.

"It's simple, really."

He took a step into the darkness and added indifferently:

"All I want is for you to owe me a favor, Changing Star. One day, when I come calling… help me out with what I ask."

It was an offer heavy with meaning. The concept of debt was somewhat sacred among the nobility of the Awakened society, especially to people who strived to follow quaint ideals like honor and virtue.

Being owed by someone like Nephis might have been more precious than a mountain of soul shards.

Especially because Sunny had not indicated what kind of help he might want to receive.

She studied his back for a few moments, and eventually nodded.

"That is acceptable."

Sunny entered the darkness and looked up at his marble throne.

Hidden from sight, he sighed deeply, then smiled.

"Then it concludes our deal."

And just like that, a tentative alliance between a mysterious Saint residing in Godgrave and a princess of the Sword Domain was forged.

Chapter-1622: Many Mysteries of Shadow

The Lord of Shadows did not seem in the mood to talk after the conclusion of the duel. Maybe he was dissatisfied with its result, or maybe he had simply strained himself too much in order to withstand the torrent of steel unleashed by Nephis, and needed rest. With how mysterious the reclusive Saint was, it was impossible to tell what was on his mind.

In any case, shortly after he had disappeared into the darkness, the beautiful onyx devil moved once again, inviting them to leave and make a camp outside the temple.

The territory around the ancient Citadel seemed safe enough, with all the Nightmare Creatures having been eradicated by Shadow and his servants. So, the Fire Keepers did not mind resting outside… there was no trust between them and the master of the temple yet, anyway. They would have felt uncomfortable resting under his roof, surrounded by powerful creatures.

A Transcendent Devil, a Transcendent Terror, a Supreme Devil… and gods knew who else. That power was enough to give a stronger force pause.

So, they made camp a dozen or so meters away from the great dark edifice of the Citadel, among the bones of slain Nightmare Creatures.

The lanterns chased away the darkness, and a fire had been ignited in the middle of the camp. Various storage Memories were summoned, containing food and beverages. They even raised several tents, hoping to enjoy a bit of peaceful sleep.

After experiencing two weeks of pure hell, the Fire Keepers could finally rest and relax a little. Of course, they did not lower their

guard completely, still wearing their armor and keeping watch in shifts.

Nephis sat in front of the fire, watching it dance with a thoughtful expression.

The Lord of Shadows…

There were too many mysteries about him.

That mask, for example…

By now, Nephis remembered where she had seen it. Ananke had worn a mask almost identical to the one worn by Shadow. It was a symbol of the priests of the Nightmare Spell.

So… was Shadow one such priest, as well, or at least considered himself to be one? Or had he simply slain a follower of Weaver in one of his Nightmares and received the mask as a reward?

In fact, Nephis had seen the depiction of Weaver's Mask long before meeting Ananke. It was drawn on the wall of the Ebony Tower, where the Demon of Destiny had left a map of strongholds built by his siblings in various realms.

The mask, representing Weaver, was placed north of the Hollow Mountains, above all six strongholds… almost as if looking at them from afar. But it did not mean that Weaver's stronghold was hidden somewhere on the Forgotten Shore, or even further north. It simply meant that no one had any idea where Weaver's stronghold was, or if the transient daemon even had one.

So, Nether had drawn it outside the map.

Was the Lord of Shadows connected to the priesthood of the Nightmare Spell, or to the Demon of Fate directly?

And what business did the heir of Shadow God have being tied to a daemon?

'Curious.'

The mask was curious. The Citadel that somehow existed in the middle of Godgrave was also curious. So was the lineage of Shadow God that the master of the Citadel seemed to possess, and his Aspect.

But most curious of all…

Was his swordsmanship.

Staring into the fire, Nephis sighed.

These days, she rarely met anyone who could wield the sword well enough to give her a challenge. There were dreadful Nightmare Creatures and Transcendent warriors with potent Aspects, sure… but that was a competition of power and will, not skill and technique.

As such, the only person Nephis could truly spar with was Morgan.

The Lord of Shadows… was at least on par with the Princess of Valor. No, not quite. It felt like he was much more dangerous.

The first battle style he had used was more or less a perfect replica of the refined and domineering style that the Knights of Valor practiced. Mastering it was already no easy feat.

But it was merely one of the styles the Lord of Shadows seemed to have mastered. He was a true sword saint, one of the few that had been born since the descent of the Nightmare Spell.

Suddenly, Nephis wanted to duel him again, this time using the full might of their Aspects. What abilities would he show her? How ingenious was his transcendent battle art?

She had no doubt that he had built one.

Which was… impressive.

Most Saints had mastered a battle art of their own, but few had created it without aid. After all, Saints were supported by their clans, as well as the Great Clans they owed allegiance to. Most had inherited the skill and wisdom of their predecessors, as well as received extensive help from exalted counselors and mentors.

Lord Shadow seemed like a solitary man. There was no clan behind him, let alone a Domain. Which meant that whatever technique he possessed had been designed by him, and him alone.

And then…

There was the second battle style he had shown, obviously as a message to her. Or a provocation.

Her father's style.

Nephis hugged her knees, calmly looking into the fire. Feeling the shift in her mood, the fire surged and swirled.

How was it possible?

As far as she knew, there were only two people in the world who had been taught that style. She had been taught by her family, and Cassie was taught by her. There were no others…

Or were there?

Had her father had a pupil that she didn't know about? Was Lord Shadow that pupil, or a disciple of that pupil?

She wanted to know. She wanted to ask.

Her father had perished when Nephis was four, so she did not have a lot of memories of him. Most of what she knew about Broken Sword was from listening to her grandmother, who talked about her son-in-law often. The rest was from the legends that he had left in the world before dying an untimely death.

But…

She sighed.

There was little sincerity in the world. Knowledge was power, and people guarded their power fervently. Usually, one had to be prepared to pay a price if they wanted to receive an answer. Secrets were not revealed easily.

She was already indebted to Lord Shadow. He seemed like an unfriendly sort, and would definitely not part with information lightly. In fact… he had probably chosen to use that style for the exact purpose of enticing her into deepening her debt.

'Devious.'

Who was that man? So strong, so devious, and having enough resources to disregard the riches of Clan Valor…

As she considered that, the ground suddenly trembled.

Chapter-1623: Dark Colossus

As the ground trembled, the lively atmosphere in the camp instantly turned cold and professional. The Fire Keepers, who had been enjoying a late supper just moments ago, instantly rose to their feet and picked up their weapons. A moment later, they were standing in a defensive formation, ready to repel any kind of attack.

Nephis had stood up, as well. The white flames burning in her eyes grew more intense, and the fire behind her grew taller, chasing the darkness further away.

'What is it?'

Was there a Nightmare Creature approaching them from afar, or had the master of the ancient temple decided to betray them?

She was going to find out soon.

As they stood motionlessly, preparing for battle, the ground shuddered again. A cold wind rose, bringing with it a strong smell of rotting leaves and humid jungle. A tense silence settled over the world.

A moment later, Nephis felt a new presence beside her. Turning her head slightly, she saw the Lord of Shadows standing at the edge of the camp, peering into the darkness calmly. He had appeared out of nowhere without making any noise, as if the shadows themselves had risen up to spawn him.

He seemed to have discarded his mask, but since Nephis was behind him, she couldn't see his face.

The Fire Keepers flinched, startled by his sudden appearance. Each was an experienced Master, and many carried Memories that enhanced their senses. It wasn't easy to sneak up on them…

And yet, the Lord of Shadow had done it effortlessly.

Nephis frowned, realizing just how vulnerable her subordinates were in front of him.

"What is happening?"

Her voice remained calm, addressing the mysterious Saint with sufficient decorum.

He remained silent for a few moments, then sighed.

"It's nothing much. One of the Great sleepers has awoken, that's all. "

Shadow lingered for a second, then added:

"I usually keep them asleep to avoid trouble, but the most feisty ones sometimes escape their slumber."

'A Great Nightmare Creature? Keep them asleep?'

Nephis frowned slightly.

"Should we fight it together, then?"

Still facing away from her, the master of the ancient temple shook his head.

"No need. It's merely a Beast."

With that, he took a step forward.

The darkness surged, enveloping him like a vast mantle. The figure of Lord Shadow dissolved into it, becoming one with the lightless void.

And then, the void exploded upward.

As Nephis watched, secretly startled, a colossus built of shadows slowly rose above the bone plain.

His body was a perfect replica of the Lord of Shadows. The titanic torso was formed first, followed by two immense arms. At first, the giant seemed to be kneeling, but then he slowly rose to his feet,

coming to stand as tall as the ancient temple. The shadows rippled and solidified, repeating the contours of his back. She saw lean muscles rolling under the obsidian skin.

A moment later, a layer of glossy onyx covered the dark colossus, encasing him in a suit of impregnable armor. His head was too far away now, the light of the enchanted lanterns unable to dispel the veil of darkness hiding his face.

When the giant took a step, the whole plain quaked.

'...A Transformation Ability?'

The size of the shadow colossus was nowhere near Effie when she assumed her Transcendent form, but it was still awe-inspiring.

But that was not the end of it.

There was a rustle from behind them, and a dreadful hiss. Turning around, the Fire Keepers saw the head of an enormous serpent appearing from the entrance of the temple. The creature was massive enough to easily swallow the entire cohort in one bite, its scales the same color as the tenebrous armor of the Lord of Shadows.

The obsidian serpent slithered out of the Citadel, its long body flowing like a river of darkness, seemingly endless. It must have been coiled around the entire great hall of the ancient temple, surrounding them from every side the moment they stepped inside.

Nephis watched carefully.

'The Terror?'

The colossal serpent slithered across the bone plain, passing the frozen Fire Keepers and approaching the giant made of shadows. Its neck rose high into the air, and it nimbly coiled around the leg of the Lord of Shadows, crawling up his body like a tree snake.

The creature reached the shoulder of the giant, and then slithered along his outstretched arm.

Then, it… changed.

Where a serpentine head was before, the sharp tip of a gargantuan sword suddenly appeared. Slowly, but also too fast to notice, the body of the Transcendent Terror rippled, and turned into an inconceivable odachi, its hilt and curving blade as long as the shadow giant was tall.

Finally, a dark titan was standing on the bone plain, his body encased in a suit of fearsome onyx armor, wielding a giant obsidian sword.

He looked like an ancient deity that had descended to the mortal realm from the heavens… or maybe crawled out of the lightless depths of the abyss.

Not paying the Fire Keepers any attention, the shadow giant took another step.

Something lunged at him from the darkness… a grotesque monstrosity that towered above the ground, its mottled fur wreathing with a swarm of pale maggots. Its misshapen head was crowned with sharp horns, and its maw was wide open, revealing a wall of massive fangs.

Its limbs were a mess of claws, chitinous scythes, and pulsating tentacles.

A chill spread through the hearts of the Fire Keepers at the sight of the hideous abomination.

However, the towering sword of the dark colossus only fell once.

One strike, and the neck of the Great Beast was cleanly severed, its head rolling to the ground.

The massive body toppled and crashed into the bone surface of the dead god's breastbone, causing it to tremble once again.

The Great Beast… was dead. Just like that.

The dark colossus peered at it with disdain, then shook his head and crumbled on itself, turning into a tide of shadows.

A moment later, all that was left was the corpse of the hideous

monstrosity, and the deep groove left in the white bone by the tip of the obsidian odachi.

Silence settled over Godgrave once again.

Nephis stared at the corpse of the abomination, her expression unreadable.

Eventually, she tilted her head a little.

'One strike.'

Suddenly, she was glad to have made a pact with the man who called himself Shadow.

...It was much better to be his ally than his enemy.

Chapter-1624: Crazy Girl

Far to the northwest of Bastion, across the chain of Death Zones crowned by Godgrave, lay the vast human enclave ruled by the Great Clan Song. Although younger and smaller in territory than the Sword Domain, the kingdom of Ki Song was nevertheless just as populous and potent.

Unlike Bastion itself, which lay at the heart of Valor's territory, the capital of Song was located at the northernmost point of her domain, on the slopes of a towering mountain chain that branched out from the Hollow Mountains. It was a stark and beautiful place nestled between snowy peaks and fuming volcanoes, shrouded in snowstorms and raining ash.

Its name was Ravenheart. The Great Citadel had another name in the runic language of the Nightmare Spell, but after an obscure figure from the first generation of the Awakened conquered it, people gradually started calling the remote mountain palace by her True Name.

That obscure Awakened warrior was the founder of the Song clan and Ki Song's late mother. Her daughter elevated their minor clan to prominence, and then to the very height of power. Similarly, Ravenheart had grown from the stronghold of a lesser Legacy clan to one of the Great Citadels of humanity, sheltering hundreds of thousands of Awakened.

And now, after the Chain of Nightmares, it was home to millions of mundane humans, as well.

The Citadel itself was a magnificent palace that stood on the slope of a snowy mountain, perched at the very edge of a bottomless chasm. The legends said that it had been cut from pure white jade once, but after enduring the wrath of the surrounding volcanoes for thousands of years, it turned entirely black, as if made from obsidian glass.

Still, contrasted against pristine white snow, its sublime beauty had only become more tantalizing.

A titanic stone bridge spanned the vast chasm between the mountain and the volcano standing opposite it, connecting the two branches of the mountain chain like a road meant for giants. Its black pillars were decorated with intricate engravings, and the scale of the construct defied reason.

These days, the members of the Song Clan inhabited the frozen obsidian palace, while the titanic bridge had become a town for the Awakened warriors, who could withstand the cold. The city itself had been built on the slopes of the volcano, where its warmth protected the mundane citizens of Ravenheart from the inhumanly harsh climate of the snowy region.

They did not have to be wary of sudden eruptions, either, because Queen Song and her Transcendent daughters could protect them from any disaster.

Ravenheart was a harsh place. But it was also an incredibly beautiful place.

And therefore, life here was harsh, but also thriving.

The surrounding lands had long been cleared of the truly dangerous Nightmare Creatures, but they were more dangerous than the heartland of the Dream Realm, where Bastion stood. Many abominations still dwelled in the snowy mountains, and the environment itself was deadly for those unprepared to face its cruelty.

At the same time, there was a lot of fertile soil in the lowlands, which had been generously fertilized by volcanic ash. There was also geothermal heat, countless hot springs, and precious minerals of all kinds everywhere around. The people who had been evacuated here from Antarctica found their lives turning stark and intense, but also intensely enjoyable.

If one grew accustomed to the solemn and eerie power of Queen Song, of course, which they quickly had.

In any case, there was endless work to be done, from plowing the ashen fields to mining mystical ores, to building a semblance of a modern infrastructure by using endless geothermal energy.

And since there were many Nightmare Creatures dwelling in the mountains, there was also a dire need for someone to protect all these workers.

…Which was why Rain was buried in the ash, sweating as she waited motionlessly. She had been laying there for a few hours already, keeping absolutely still.

Around a hundred meters away from her, where the slope of the gorge rose sharply, a hideous creature was slowly dragging its body from between the cliffs. It resembled a scaled worm with six long, thin limbs, each ending with dagger-like claws. Its maw was a horrid circular mess of sharp, needle-like fangs.

'Damnation.'

She had expected a Beast, but was faced with a Monster instead. Granted, the Stone Worms were merely Dormant abominations…

But since Rain wasn't even a Sleeper, but a powerless mundane human instead, that thing could rip her apart in a matter of seconds. No, not even seconds… a second.

'No wonder everyone calls me "the crazy girl"... I am indeed crazy. I'm crazy to have listened to you, mad bastard!'

If not for the nagging of her teacher, she would have long ago applied to return to the waking world, thus challenging the First Nightmare and becoming an Awakened. But no… he just had to insist that his student could only Awaken naturally, without becoming infected by the Nightmare Spell.

And, young and naive as she had been, she actually believed in his nonsense!

Years had already passed, and yet she was still a mundane human. Granted, she could somewhat feel her essence now… which supposedly was the hardest step.

Still! Her teacher was without a doubt a brazen scam artist!

'Damn you, you damned ghost… or vampire… ar whatever the hell you are…'

As she was thinking that, a quiet voice suddenly resounded from behind her. Rain was startled, but, remembering her training, remained absolutely motionless despite that. She didn't have to turn around to know that it was her shadow talking.

It said:

"You wouldn't be thinking something strange about me again, would you?"

Stone Worms had very bad hearing, but could feel the smallest vibration spreading through the ground. She coughed quietly, then answered in a whisper:

"What? Of course not, respected teacher! Your pupil… would never dare do something that disloyal..."

The quiet voice responded dubiously:

"Really? Well… good! You should hurry up, though. The wind is changing."

Rain uttered a stifled curse and slowly rose to one knee.

It was time to kill another Dormant Monster.

'How many have I killed, already?'

More than any Sleeper she knew, certainly. And more than many young Awakened in Ravenheart, as well, despite being mundane.

But she still had to be extremely cautious. She couldn't allow a single mistake… it was just like how her teacher always said. One mistake was all it took to turn into a corpse.

And becoming a corpse in Ravenheart was just too creepy.

Granted... teacher would probably save her if something happened.

Probably.

'...Right?'

Chapter-1625: Undergeared

Rain rose to one knee in one smooth motion and raised her bow. Flakes of ash rained from it like black snow, dancing gracefully in the wind. In one heartbeat, she took out an arrow from her quiver and nocked it on the string. Another heartbeat, and she strained her muscles to draw the bow.

The composite alloy resisted her pull, but swiftly surrendered to her strength and perfect form, both of which were the result of arduous training and countless hours of practice.

Her bow… was not a fancy Memory weapon. It was quite mundane, made from alloy and filament — more powerful than such weapons used to be, but nowhere near its enchanted counterparts. It was not a compound bow, either. More than that, even as far as recurve bows went, hers was on the weaker side.

But there was nothing Rain could do about it. There were alloy bows of monstrous power out there, but they were meant to be used by the Awakened. With her pitiful mundane strength, she wouldn't even be able to draw one, let alone do so swiftly and reliably.

As for compound bows… while they offered increased draw weight and other advantages, that was only good on paper. In reality, there was more to a weapon than its power. How reliable was it? Was it easy to carry? Would it endure the wilds? Could it be cared for and maintained in harsh conditions?

And so on.

Awakened did not have to think about such things, but Rain did. And thanks to her teacher, she had learned all about these matters. Each piece of her equipment was picked out thoughtfully.

'...Yeah. Not at all because I simply can't use anything better.'

The inner layer of Rain's kit consisted of a military bodysuit, the kind the soldiers of the Evacuation Army had used in Antarctica. It could repair itself and regulate the temperature of her body, which was a necessity here in Ravenheart, where lethal cold and blistering heat somehow coexisted in appalling harmony.

Granted, the self-repair function of the bodysuit was practically exhausted after years of extensive use, and she had had to patch it up by hand on several occasions. Her teacher was weirdly good with thread and needle, for some reason, imparting that knowledge on his reluctant student.

She wore leather pants on top of the bodysuit, made from the hide of an Awakened Beast, as well as knee-high boots of the same material. The rest of her clothes consisted of a perfectly mundane henley, wool vest, and a military jacket with a manually reinforced lining.

There were a few pieces of armor supplementing her modest ensemble, as well — alloy bracers and shin guards, a leather chest guard, and a jointed shoulder guard.

The mundane armor was not nearly enough to protect her from the claws of Nightmare Creatures, but it was better than nothing. It could protect her from a glancing blow or two, at least. Wearing anything heavier would have just slowed her down without providing much additional protection.

Rain was also wearing leather gloves, while her long winter coat was currently folded and hidden inside her pack.

…Needless to say, she felt bitter envy every time she saw young Awakened gallivanting in suits of shiny enchanted armor. They didn't even need to wash their Memories, let alone repair them by hand! Not to mention the fact that their armor was much more durable.

'Focus!'

The Stone Worm was almost a hundred meters away. The ash was raining from the sky, making its figure vague and blurry… at least it was easy to tell the direction and strength of the wind. Hitting a target from such a distance was not an easy feat, but well within

Rain's capability.

However, she wasn't sure that she would be able to kill the abomination with one arrow. Her arrows were more potent than her bow, true — the arrowheads had been made from the fangs of an Awakened Beast, and were quite deadly as a result. But the Stone Worms did not have an easily exploited vulnerability. There was no spot she could hit to bring the Monster down immediately.

The vile things were also terribly fast despite spending most of their lives underground. It would take the Stone Worm a couple of seconds, three at most, to cover the hundred meters separating them.

And another moment to rip her to shreds.

It had already noticed her, too.

'Be calm.'

It was like her teacher always said…

And don't you dare die, or I will kill you myself!

As a respectful and dutiful pupil, Rain had no choice but to obey her teacher.

She held her breath and took aim. Time slowed down to a crawl. Rain moved her bow slightly, accounting for the wind, and then relaxed her fingers, allowing them to slide off the string.

Relieved from terrible tension, her alloy bow propelled the arrow forward with dire force. The string struck against her chest guard like a whip. The falling ash swirled, disturbed by the violent turbulence.

A hundred meters away, the Stone Worm toppled to the ground in a mess of long limbs. The arrow had dove into its circular maw, piercing the creature's brain.

Sadly…

Stone Worms had several independent brains.

Before Rain had time to blink, the abomination rolled on the ground and shot toward her like a revolting flesh torpedo. It covered half of the distance between them in what felt like a split second. A cloud of ash rose into the air in its wake, spreading outward like a wave of boiling darkness.

Before it could cover the remaining distance, though, a second arrow struck it. It had only taken Rain that long to draw her bow again, adjust her aim, and let the arrow fly.

Even though hitting a moving target was endlessly more difficult, let alone such a fast one, the second arrow unerringly penetrated the creature's maw again. This time, it went in at a shallow angle, hitting the Stone Worm's spine.

The abominations stumbled… but continued barreling toward Rain.

She blinked.

'Crap.'

Chapter-1626: The Incredible Adventures and Astonishing Deeds of Heroic Dreamer… Wait, Who? What Was His Name? Abridged (Volume VII)

Dropping the bow, she hurriedly picked up a long javelin that had been laying under the ash.

Rain's weapon of choice was a bow. However, that did not mean that she was only versed in using a bow. Her teacher insisted that a ranged weapon was only good if one could keep the enemy at range, and in the Dream Realm, not even Saints could guarantee something like that.

Therefore, she was proficient not only with ranged weapons, but also with a wide range of weapons.

Rain was nothing if not resourceful.

By the time she grabbed the javelin and jumped to her feet, the Stone Worm was almost upon her.

With fetid blood spilling from its torn maw, the horrid creature raised its front limbs to slice her into pieces…

And suddenly disappeared from view.

The pit Rain had dug up and covered with branches might not have been deep, but it was perfectly placed to stop the charge of a mindless monster.

There was a great benefit in being able to handle a multitude of weapons, but there was an even greater benefit in always being prepared. Her teacher had hammered that simple principle into her head a long time ago.

Before the Stone Worm could recover from suddenly dropping through the ash, the heavy javelin struck it with all the force she could muster. Its white scales were broken by the wide spearhead, and the abominable monster let out a piercing screech.

Rain paled a little and finally drew her sword. The enemy was severely wounded, but it was not dead yet.

A mess of hideous flesh and thin limbs staggered out of the pit, only to be met by the blade of the tachi. Rain severed the front limbs of the sluggish monster, then delivered a ruthless slash across its scaly neck, putting a gash into it.

A few more precise strikes and well-timed dodges, and the abomination finally grew motionless. Only half of its vile body managed to crawl out of the shallow pit, and was now laying on the ash.

Rain slumped and grabbed her knees, panting heavily. Her lungs were burning, and a river of adrenaline coursing through her blood.

'D—d—dam it...'

Then, a voice resounded from behind her.

"You have slain a Dormant Monster, Stone Worm. Your shadow grows stronger!"

Turning around, she threw a dark look at her teacher, who had finally deigned to crawl out of her shadow in all his shameless splendor.

"...What the hell are you on about?"

The young man who was standing behind her, wearing light armor woven out of dark silk, looked away in embarrassment.

"Ah, that. Don't mind me. Just something I used to hear often."

Rain took a deep breath and turned away with a stoic expression on her pale, but beautiful face.

'...I am definitely going to kill him one day.'

Was it possible to kill a ghost?

***

Rain's teacher… was a strange existence.

Usually, he resided in her shadow, only showing up when no one else was around. At first, she thought that she had gone insane and was hallucinating, but after spending some time with the mysterious apparition, Rain slowly realized that it was real.

And not only that, but also immensely powerful.

Luckily, the apparition was mostly benevolent, and did not seem to harbor any ill will toward her. On the contrary, it… he… treated Rain with something that resembled familial affection. It was almost as if he was the spirit of her distant ancestor.

She did not think that her family had such an ancestor, though. But then again, Rain was adopted, and didn't know much about her biological parents. So… it might have been possible that there was an eccentric dark deity in her family tree?

Her teacher did, indeed, look a little bit like her. A much more glamorous, handsome, and male version of her, to be precise.

…Even if he was on the shorter side.

In any case, her teacher — who called himself Shadow — was a strange being. When he emerged from her shadow, he looked like a young man with flawless alabaster skin, raven-black hair, and beautiful eyes that resembled two pieces of glistening onyx. His exquisite appearance was perfectly human, if a bit too sublime.

That said… her teacher did not have a shadow of his own.

He also avoided mirrors like a plague, to the point that she was prohibited from having any in her vicinity. So, although Rain couldn't confirm it, she suspected that he did not have a reflection, either.

Which led her to believe that her teacher was a vampire.

He wasn't afraid of sunlight, though, and did not seem interested in drinking her blood. Or any blood, for that matter.

In short, even after spending four years in the company of her teacher, Rain still had no idea what he was.

Any attempt to ask him questions about his identity resulted in nonsensical answers that simply couldn't be taken seriously.

Like:

"Teacher… please tell me. Who are you, really?"

"Haven't I told you already? Gods, how many times do I have to repeat it? I am… your long-lost brother."

"I'm pretty sure I would remember having an older brother."

"You would assume so, wouldn't you? Ah, but, you see… after I killed the evil version of myself and reached the estuary of the river of time, which flows inside the great pyramid that a dreadful demon had built from the blood and flesh of an Unholy Titan, I was attacked by a vile, odious, very nasty, no good bird and had my fate stolen. So, no one in the world remembers me."

"...Uh-huh."

"Oh, but before that, I was very famous. Not only was I famous, but even my secret alter ego was famous. World-renowned, even. I was a war hero, too. And extremely wealthy. In fact… do you know Princess Nephis?

Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan? I was practically her boyfriend."

"Uh-huh…"

Or:

"Teacher, can I ask you a question? How old are you, exactly?"

"You certainly can. Huh. That's a complicated question! One might say that I am a few years older than you. But, at the same time, this incarnation of me has only been born about four years ago? Oh, but actually, I guess I'm thousands of years old.

I've just forgotten most of it after my cursed magical sword rebelled against me, and I had to destroy it, as well as my memories."

"A… cursed magical sword? How did you destroy it?"

"Well, I just told it to be gone. And it was gone. Your teacher is that awesome."

"..."

Or:

"Teacher, tell me the truth… you're not an evil god, are you?"

"Of course not!"

"Really?"

"Sure. I mean… the blood of an ancient demon does flow in my veins, and I did devour the alabaster phalanx of a nebulous deity after being cast down into the darkness of a bottomless abyss. And technically, I am indeed the master of a lightless fragment that was torn from a divine realm. But, an evil god? Preposterous!

"I… I see."

"I mean. I am a demigod, at best…"

In short…

After a while, Rain had stopped asking questions.

She felt that, even if she had not gone mad yet, she definitely would if she continued.

So, she just lived her life and endured the harsh training, as well as the odd and eerie quirks of her mysterious teacher. Despite blaming him for not getting a chance to challenge the First Nightmare, Rain knew that his guidance had saved her life on numerous occasions. She had grown much stronger and more capable under his mentorship, too.

After a while, she had grown accustomed to his company, and even found comfort in it.

Not right now, though. Right now, she was seriously considering exorcizing him.

"Hey, Rain? Why are you spacing out?"

She flinched and looked at her teacher, feeling slightly embarrassed.

He shook his head.

"Go on, harvest that Stone Worm before the Queen takes it."

Rain stared at the revolting corpse of the dead abomination, sighed, and jumped down into the pit.

Pulling a sharp hunting knife from the sheath attached to the small of her back, she grimaced and got to work, mumbling:

"Before the Queen takes it? Ha! Why would she take a measly Stone Worm… as if she has need of such a weak and ugly servant…"

Chapter-1627: Hunting Spoils

Despite the fact that Rain's clash with the Stone Worm had only lasted a dozen seconds, she was tired. Not only because she had tracked the creature down for a long time first, spending hours to prepare the ambush, but also because those few seconds of absolute mental concentration and daunting physical exertion took a lot out of her.

That was how it went every time. If a mundane human wanted to face a Nightmare Creature, anything less than giving it your all, and then some, meant death. Not that there were a lot of mundanes going out of their way to fight abominations — not a lot of those who lived to tell the tale, at least.

In that sense, Rain was an anomaly.

Sadly, the harsh physical demands of the hunt were not over after her prey was dead.

Grimacing, Rain gripped her sharp hunting knife and went about dressing the Stone Worm.

Its flesh was wiry and tough. Its scales were even tougher. Even with her knife having been forged from mystical steel, it took all of Rain's strength to rend the dead abomination. Especially because she didn't want to become drenched in its blood — not only because that would have been icky, but also because the stench of blood could attract other Nightmare Creatures.

"Curse it… curse it all…"

She worked up a sweat, eventually taking off her jacket and vest and rolling up the sleeves of her henley. The ash continued to rain from the sky, smearing her ivory skin like black ink.

Her teacher, meanwhile, sat comfortably on a rock and observed her with a content expression, not even trying to help.

'Bastard..'

"Cursing again? Rain, a proper young lady should act with modesty, poise, and decorum. Ah, you were such a well-mannered girl when we met… where did you even pick up these bad habits? Who taught you such foul language? Tell me, and I'll beat the crap out of the damned bastard…"

She paused for a moment, glared at him, and then returned to her work without saying a word.

"Stop pouting."

'I'm not pouting!'

Rain collected the abomination's sharp fangs — those could be used to fashion arrowheads — then moved to its limbs and separated the stonelike blades from the joints. The blades could be sold in Ravenheart for a good price or bartered for other materials.

However, the true treasure was the hide of the Stone Worm. Although it was merely a Dormant Monster, the scales of these creatures were lightweight and tough. The Awakened who had not earned a good armor-type Memory yet often used them to fashion scalemail — those with plenty of coins could afford something better, of course, but there were many of those who couldn't.

And when the latter got in trouble, their armor needed to be mended with even more scales. Therefore, there was always demand for Stone Worm's hides. Rain herself had worn such a scalemail armor at one point, but after hunting an Awakened Beast, she switched to equipment made from its leather.

So, she could earn a pretty penny by selling this hide. It was just that harvesting it was a tough and dirty process.

She arduously separated the hide from the flesh of the monster, cleaned it the best she could, and rolled it into a hefty sack. Tying the sack with rope, she grimaced and rubbed it with ash to get rid of the

smell.

Then, she retrieved her two arrows. After studying them for a few moments, Rain sighed. One could be repaired, but the other was unsalvageable. Her arsenal of arrows was growing dangerously poor — there were plenty of them in the quiver, but only a few of those made from the fangs of the Awakened Beast remained.

She cleaned the intact arrow and put it aside.

Finally, for the most important part…

Fishing out two gleaming crystals from the remains of the Stone Worm, Rain looked at her teacher and smiled.

"Shall I?"

He raised his white hands and applauded her quietly.

"Go ahead. Good kill."

Rain pushed what remained of the hideous carcass into the pit with her foot, then knelt and placed the crystals on a flat rock. She often saw Awakened crush soul shards in their fists, but her mundane hands bruised terribly if she tried. So, instead, she simply brought the butt of her knife down on them.

The crystals shattered, and she felt an almost imperceptible amount of foreign essence trickle into her soul. It was a strange sensation, and one she had only become able to perceive recently.

Her teacher seemed satisfied, and she was, too.

"Teacher… how long do you think it will be before I can attempt forming a soul core?"

He studied her for a few moments, then smiled.

"Soon. You can already sense and control your essence, so it won't be long before it awakens. However…"

A soft sigh escaped from his lips.

"Something tells me that it is not soon enough. So, we'll need to hurry up. You have to hunt another Awakened abomination. A strong one, as well."

Rain shivered, remembering the last time she faced an Awakened Nightmare Creature. That clash had almost cost her life. Had that thing not been strong, in her teacher's eyes?

She gave him a long look.

"You know that we can simply buy an Awakened soul shard or few? It will be expensive, sure. But my parents can help. Wait… actually, why do we need to buy them? Teacher, you're so great and awesome. Just do your thing!

Tell a bunch of powerful abominations to be gone, and let me collect the shards!"

He stared at her dubiously and coughed.

"Well… sure, you're right. Your teacher is awesome! I can kill the abominations for you…"

Rain's eyes gleamed.

"Really?"

But he was not done talking:

"...and while I'm at it, why don't I Awaken for you, as well? Should I also feed you from a spoon, like a little baby?"

He scoffed.

"Let me tell you, a baby I knew Transcended before learning how to walk. And he didn't even have me as a teacher! Come to think of it, what's your excuse? Huh? What do you have to say for yourself?"

Rain glared at him hatefully, then looked away.

"Forget I said anything."

She cleaned her weapons, sheathed her knife, and fastened the rolled hide of the Stone Worm to her pack. Finally ready to depart, Rain hoisted the pack on her shoulders and started to walk.

It was time to head back to Ravenheart.

Chapter-1628: Weary Pilgrim

Rain made a point of using light equipment, and yet, she carried considerable weight. There were her clothes and armor, her bow, a quiver of arrows, the javelin she used, her sword, the hunting knife attached to her belt, and another knife hidden in her boot. There was also plenty of stuff in her pack and attached to her pack — everything she needed to hunt and survive in the wilderness.

It would have been nice to simply summon and dismiss all these things when she needed them, but alas, Rain couldn't use Memories. She couldn't even really use the Memories that someone else had summoned and handed to her, because her soul did not have a core, and she was not a carrier of the Nightmare Spell.

Weighed down by the additional burden of the Stone Worm's hide and fangs, Rain felt miserable.

It didn't help at all that Ravenheart was situated in the mountains. She was currently at the bottom of a deep gorge, not too far from the relatively flat area at the foot of the mountain chain where the farms feeding the city were located. There was a long and tough climb ahead of her.

Using the javelin as a staff, Rain slowly made her way out of the gorge. Luckily, she was in good shape… amazing shape, really. Her lithe and resilient body had been tempered by years of relentless training, and was pretty much at the very limit of what mundane humans could achieve.

In the past, Rain had trained extensively with private tutors. She had thought that her physical condition was stellar back then… she had known nothing. Under her teacher's harsh and prudent guidance, her physical state entered an entirely new territory. Her youthful body was strong, tenacious, and as nimble as that of a cat.

Even the most elite athletes would have been rattled and green with envy if they witnessed what she was capable of… not that it mattered. Any Awakened could still blow her away with one half-hearted slap.

'Ah… whatever.'

Sometimes, Rain was angry at her teacher for prohibiting her from challenging the First Nightmare. But, at the same time, she was thankful to him. Not for her own sake, but on behalf of her parents.

They had already lost one child to the Nightmare Spell. If she was alone, Rain would have gladly risked her life for the chance of becoming an Awakened… but she could not bear the thought of putting her mom and dad through that suffering again.

So, her teacher's promise to help her Awaken without having to challenge a Nightmare was like a glimmer of light in a sea of darkness.

In any case… even though climbing mountains in terrible weather while carrying a heavy load was hard and miserable, she had long grown accustomed to it.

As Rain ascended higher and higher, her teacher walked side by side with her, going over the events of the hunt. She had performed well and managed to kill the Stone Worm without sustaining any injuries, but there were still things that could have been done better, and things that could have been done differently.

"Maybe I shouldn't sell the blades we harvested from the Stone Worm. Next time, I can place them at the bottom of the pit like spikes."

"That's a good idea, but don't rely on traps too much. This time, the bastard ran straight, but next time, you might not get so lucky. What were you going to do if the worm bypassed your pit?"

"Retreat to lure him into the second pit, of course. And anyway, was it really luck? I investigated the slope and found the wormholes, chose an ambush spot, and dug pits between the former and the

latter. Beasts are stupid, so the enemy would have gone after me using the shortest path. Sure, it turned out to be a Monster… a bit smarter, but still pretty dumb."

"What do you think luck is, brat? Luck is not something that just happens to you, it's something that you make happen. Believe me, I would know! I used to be the luckiest person in the world. Unluckiest, too..."

Soon, Rain climbed high enough to escape the raining ash. The scorching heat was replaced by merciless cold, and the black soot was replaced by pristine snow. A strong wind rose, chilling her to the bone and almost tossing her off the slope.

Cursing, Rain shivered and hurriedly took her coat out of the pack, wrapping herself in its warmth and pulling the fur hood down. The coat, too, was fashioned from the hide of the Awakened Beast she had hunted, so it was enough to protect her from the fatal cold of the mountains.

Buttoning up the tall collar to shield her face, she lifted the pack and turned to look at her teacher.

He was standing a few meters away, wearing nothing but his light armor. Nevertheless, he was not showing any sign of being bothered by the cold, which only went further to solidify Rain's conviction that her teacher was some kind of unholy wraith.

His gaze was strangely solemn.

Turning to look in the same direction, she suddenly noticed a dark silhouette slowly moving through the snowstorm. Rain tensed for a moment, but then relaxed, noticing that it was a human.

A moment later, the strong wind died down, and the blizzard ended just as suddenly as it had begun.

She waved a hand and headed toward the stranger.

"Hey! Are you lost?"

However, her hand froze in the air. Something was wrong…

Why hadn't her teacher disappeared into the shadows? He never showed himself when other people were around.

Her javelin was already rising when she finally got a good look at the approaching stranger.

...It was a young woman three or four years younger than herself. A teenager, really. Just like her teacher, she was only wearing a suit of light armor, which was torn and turned dark with frozen blood. Her skin was so pale that it looked blue, like that of a corpse, and her steps were slow and clumsy.

Her eyes were like frosty glass, devoid of any light, and her face was like a mask carved out of ice.

She was dead.

"Don't disturb her."

Her teacher's voice was glum. Rain grew quiet, lowering her javelin, and then took a step back to let the dead girl pass. A tiny sigh escaped from her lips.

The closer the walking corpse drew, the better she could see the terrible wounds covering her frigid body. Eventually, unable to look, Rain turned away and furtively rubbed her eyes.

The dead girl walked past them without showing any reaction, her bruised pale face motionless, and slowly disappeared into the swirling snow. A few moments later, the wind erased her footprints, as if she had never existed.

Rain and her teacher were left alone on the snowy slope.

She sighed.

The winter solstice had just passed recently...

"Is she… is she one of this year's Sleepers?"

He nodded.

"She must have died on the way to a Citadel. So, the Queen took her."

Rain remained silent for a while, then sighed again.

Queen Song held authority over death, so anything that died in her Domain was taken by her. It wasn't rare to see the dead pilgrims walking through the snow. For some, the journey was long… for some, the journey was short. After reaching Ravenheart, they entered the ice caves under the palace and became the Queen's servants.

Queen Song was the queen of the living, but she was also the queen of the dead. That was why people in the Sword Domain derisively called her the Queen of Worms.

That nickname was preposterous, of course. There were no worms in the Ice Halls, where the cold was so terrible that only the dead could survive.

…Rain stared in the direction where the taken girl had disappeared, considering if she should follow her. Following a pilgrim was safer, because Nightmare Creatures tended to avoid them.

But in the end, she decided to continue on her way. Seeing the dead girl was just too unnerving.

Because the perished Sleeper reminded Rain of her own insolent aspirations to become a carrier of the Nightmare Spell against her teacher's wishes. If she had…

Would she have ended up walking frozen through the snow, too?

Chapter-1629: Roads to the Future

Eventually, Rain reached one of the roads leading from the lowlands to the city. These mountain roads had been in use from before the Chain of Nightmares… it was hard to remember now after the population of Ravenheart exploded to many millions, but it had been a Great Citadel even prior to that.

The roads leading to the great bridge, and the beautiful palace beyond it, were actually thousands of years old. Granted, they had been in a state of desolation and disrepair when the Song clan made the ancient Citadel their home.

The Awakened of the great Legacy clan had restored them to their former glory, and the whole network was further expanded to account for the increased traffic in the past four years.

Now, heavily protected road crews were far away from the Citadel, building safe highways to other cities within the Song Domain. Many Awakened with Utility Aspects were participating in the construction, and many warriors were employed to defend the moving builder camps from the roving Nightmare Creatures.

Rain had even tried to get hired for one of the crews, but no one wanted to employ a mundane fighter.

The best they could do was remain polite and not laugh in her face.

'Ah…'

She couldn't really blame them. In any case, now that she had reached the wide and well-maintained road, the rest of the ascent would become much easier. There was probably a metaphor about the unnecessary hardships of walking the untrodden path somewhere

in there, but Rain wasn't going to start complaining to her teacher again.

He had retreated into her shadow, anyway, unwilling to be seen by other people.

Rain rested for a bit, quenched her thirst from a military canteen, and continued on her way.

There were many people on the road. Workers descending into the lowlands or returning from their shifts, Song warriors on patrols, caravans loaded with heavy cargo… life was thriving, and the young city was boiling with activity.

Rain had grown up in the vast human jungle of NQSC, so Ravenheart did not seem that large, in comparison. However, it somehow felt much more vibrant. Its atmosphere was entirely different, as though everyone here was looking forward to the future, instead of trying not to think about it while being afraid of the past.

Four years ago, she did not understand the decision her parents had made to relocate the whole family, including her younger siblings, into the Dream Realm. Sure, her father had been offered a new position as one of the government liaisons in the Song Domain, which was technically a big promotion…

But was it worth it, to uproot the family, abandon the safety and modern convenience of NQSC, and tie the lives of their children to the Dream Realm? Returning to the waking world or leaving the Domain meant being sent into the First Nightmare, after all. No matter how well-prepared you were, it was a deadly gamble.

When Rain asked her parents why they wanted to move to Ravenheart, her father had answered simply:

"Because that is where the future is."

Now, she thought she understood what he had meant. The future of humanity was, indeed, here. Currently, the waking world was incomparably more populous and developed than the Dream Realm… but in a generation or two, their positions would be reversed.

Eventually, the dying birthplace of humanity might even be entirely abandoned, making this harsh and dreadful world their only home.

And those who had left the cradle early would have an advantage in that future. So, the decision her parents had made was ultimately for the sake of Rain and her siblings. It was all to give them a head start.

'If humanity can even survive in the Dream Realm.'

Which was not a given, despite the power of the two Sovereigns.

She sighed and stepped aside to let a heavy wagon roll past her. Some of these wagons were being pulled by Awakened, who were much stronger and more resilient than any beast of burden could be, while some were not.

The one rolling past Rain was being pulled by… a Nightmare Creature.

A hideous beast that resembled a nightmarish fusion of a carnivorous bull and a horned reptile was attached to a harness, dragging the wagon behind it.

There were no draught animals in the Dream Realm, or any other kind of cattle. However, here in Ravenheart, Nightmare Creatures were often used to pull wagons, plow the fields, and perform all kinds of labor-intensive or dangerous jobs.

It was all thanks to Saint Song Eunbin, better known as Beastmaster. Funnily enough, the most terrifying of Ki Song's daughters had also done the most to ease the lives of the citizens of Ravenheart. If not for her, the development of the city, and the Song Domain as a whole, would have never been as fast or as explosive.

Of course, it was still a bit creepy to be around the subjugated Nightmare Creatures, and one had to be cautious around them. Even enchanted by Beastmaster, they were dangerous beasts, so each had to be watched over by a trained handler.

Looking at the wagon roll away, Rain sighed.

"Saint Eunbin is amazing."

Her teacher's voice resounded from the shadows, sounding a bit wistful:

"Oh? Beastmaster? Well, she's not bad… you know, she once asked me to run away with her. Of course, I refused. Your teacher is not someone who can be swayed by a pretty face!"

Rain gave her shadow a dubious glance, but kept her remarks to herself.

Grimacing, she carried her heavy pack and continued forward.

The closer to the city she got, the more crowded the road became. There were more Awakened patrolling it, too, some even accompanied by Echoes. The temperature slowly rose until it was warm enough for her to take off her coat. She even unbuttoned her jacket.

By the time the distant cold sun was ready to disappear behind the horizon, Rain finally reached her destination.

In front of her, built on the slope of the tall volcano, stood the gates of Ravenheart.

Chapter-1630: Ravenheart

From where Rain stood on the slope, she could see most of the city.

Ravenheart was separated into three distinct districts.

The largest by far was sprawled on the dark slope of the fuming volcano, protected from the merciless cold by its heat. This was where millions of mundane humans lived. Their homes were mostly built from black stone, so it seemed as though the entire city was a part of the mountain, intricately carved from its slope by some divine being.

The second district was built on the grandiose stone bridge that stretched over a bottomless chasm toward a distant snowy mountain. It was much smaller than the first one, but still rather large. That Bridge was home to most of the Awakened citizens of Ravenheart — since only they could survive the bitter cold and the strong winds blowing across it.

And finally, a sublime palace that seemed to be cut from obsidian glass stood at the opposite end of the great bridge. The palace was visible from anywhere in Ravenheart when the weather was good, its dark and ethereal beauty never failing to take one's breath away.

That was where Queen Song and her clan lived, and where the Gateway to the waking world was located.

…The Dream Gate, meanwhile, was located directly opposite the palace, on the slope of the volcano behind the mundane district. Supply shipments and new settlers arrived from it almost every day, lured by the promise of a better life.

Rain spent a few moments enjoying the view of the city, then hurried to the gate. She couldn't wait to reach her den and climb under a warm blanket.

There were a few familiar faces preparing to leave the city just as she was returning. A group of young Awakened were gathered in front of the gate, all clad in enchanted armor and wielding Memory weapons. A few of the young men seemed to be paying rapt attention to her.

Rain sighed.

'These guys again…'

Her teacher didn't say anything, but she could feel an almost palpable scorn radiating from her shadow.

One of the young Awakened waved at her and smiled:

"Rain! Coming back from a hunt?"

She lingered, trying to come up with a polite way to avoid a conversation. Sadly, her mind was blank.

Eventually, Rain forced out a pale smile:

"Oh… yeah. I tracked down the Nightmare Creature that has been harassing one of the farms recently. A Stone Worm. Yeah… it's dead."

The young man stared at her somewhat intensely, wearing an expression that she struggled to discern.

'Why does he always stare at me? I'm crazy, I know! No need to make your distaste so obvious!'

To add insult to injury, the guy was very handsome… like all Awakened were…

He used to be one of the mundane humans that had relocated to Ravenheart, like her, but challenged the First Nightmare last year. Being more or less the same age, they had known each other before, a little. But now there was a great divide between their status and social standing.

"Is there something on my face?"

The young Awakened coughed and awkwardly looked away.

"N—no, no… ah, we are just leaving to patrol. Anyway, good to see you… oh! That, uh… is that a Stone Worm hide? I was actually hoping to purchase some scales. Do you want to… want to meet tomorrow, maybe? I have some spare coin to spend…"

Rain gave him a strange look.

The guy was clearly wearing a full suit of enchanted armor. From the look of it, it was an Awakened Memory, and of a high Tier, at that. Why the hell would he need Stone Worm scales?

He noticed her expression and coughed again.

"Ah! It's for a friend of mine. A friend."

'Weirdo…'

Rain shrugged.

"Aren't you going on a patrol? You won't be back for at least a week. Sorry, I don't want my house to reek like a slaughterhouse, so I'll sell the hide tomorrow on the market."

The young man blinked.

"Oh... right..."

She shook her head, nodded at him, and walked away.

As Rain was leaving, though, she heard the Awakened whispering among each other:

"Huh? Who was that? Why is she wearing trash, does she have no Memories?"

"You don't know? That's Crazy Rain! She's a mundane girl who goes around hunting Nightmare Creatures."

"What? No way…"

"It's true. You only Awakened this year, so you don't know. She's infamous here in Ravenheart, actually. Some say that she has killed

more abominations than all of us combined… no one knows why she's still alive, but she is."

"Damn. Too bad she's a lunatic…"

"Both of you, shut up!"

"Yeah, shut up! And don't call her a lunatic!"

"She might hear..."

Rain walked away, leaving the annoying whispers behind.

Passing through the city gates, she pursed her lips and complained to her teacher:

"Why do those guys always stare at me and try to stir up trouble? Can't they just leave me alone?"

Her teacher answered in an incredulous tone:

"You don't know?"

Rain raised an eyebrow.

"Know what?"

There was a long pause, and then her teacher chuckled.

"They stare at you because you're pretty! There's no one prettier than my little sister!"

She couldn't help but burst into laughter, making a few people give her strange looks.

'Right. Perhaps talking to myself in the middle of the street is not the best idea… especially considering that they already think I'm crazy…'

Rain shook her head derisively.

"Who, me? There are thousands of female Awakened in Ravenheart, and each of them is prettier than me. I doubt an Awakened guy would ever give me a second look."

Of course, she knew that she was... not too bad, really, appearance-wise. By mundane standards. But the effect of the Awakening on one's body was simply too great.

'Ah… they all have such smooth and silky skin. And no calluses. A weathered brute like me cannot compete…'

Her teacher scoffed quietly in the shadows.

"Gods. How dense are you, girl?"

He remained silent for a few moments, and then suddenly gasped.

"...Wait. Eye candy café!"

There was another long pause, and then a dejected sigh.

"We are definitely siblings…"

Chapter-1631: Hidden Menace

The outer wall of the mundane district was thick and tall. Rain passed through the gateway, still thinking about what her teacher had said…

'Pretty? I'm pretty? He was teasing me, right? That scoundrel! Maybe if he allowed me to have a mirror at home, I wouldn't have had to ask!'

Her thoughts were interrupted by an Awakened warrior who suddenly appeared in her way. His equipment was visibly more potent than that of the young men and women whom she had met outside, and his face was much more mature.

Unlike those inexperienced greenhorns, he was a true warrior of Song.

"This way, please."

Rain obediently followed the Awakened to the side, where a cohort of veterans like him was keeping a watchful eye on everyone entering the city. They were led by a stunningly beautiful woman wearing an enchanted robe of fine wine-colored silk.

A Master.

There was no sign of Rain's teacher, as if he had dove deeper into the shadows. She approached the beautiful woman and bowed respectfully.

The Ascended smiled.

"Oh, it's you, little sister. Rain, was it? Please don't move."

A torrent of ethereal sparks swirled around her hand, and a red

flower appeared on her palm. Its dark petals seemed to be glistening with dew, and it emanated a pleasant fragrance.

The woman raised her hand, as if offering the flower to Rain. Of course, Rain did not take it. Instead, she froze and looked at the crimson blossom solemnly. A few moments passed in tense silence, then a few more.

She glanced at the beautiful Master. The woman was still smiling, but her eyes were cold and full of dark… something.

'Murder math.'

That's what her teacher called it. Rain remembered the strange term well, because he often lamented the fact that she seemed to lack that cold quality, whatever it was.

In any case, the powerful Ascended was calmly calculating how to kill her, should the need arise. It was more than a little bit unnerving.

Luckily, nothing of the sort ended up happening. A dozen seconds later, the Ascended's smile finally reached her eyes. Moving her hand, she dismissed the red flower and gestured for Rain to leave.

"Welcome back. Have a nice evening."

Rain bowed one more time and walked away.

Internally, she sighed.

The strange meeting… was actually not strange at all. It was something that everyone entering Ravenheart — or any other Citadel in the Song Domain, she would imagine — had to go through. The Sword Domain had their own version of the ritual, and there were versions of it in the waking world, as well.

Its purpose was to prevent the dreadful bane, Skinwalker, from infiltrating more human settlements.

Although all other abominable things that had invaded the waking world during the Chain of Nightmare were either slain or remained in Antarctica, Skinwalker was different. It had entered the siege capitals

by pretending to be human before the Dream Gates were even opened. Once there, Skinwalker spread like a curse…

There were little details about how it had been stopped, but Rain heard that the government forces led by Wake of Ruin and the great clans had joined forces to eradicate the creature. The Sovereigns emerged, and Lady Nephis returned from the Third Nightmare with five other Saints just in time. Eventually, they managed to prevent Skinwalker from spreading to the rest of the Quadrants.

But they had not managed to destroy it completely.

Today, Skinwalker was like a nightmare that haunted all of humanity. Its vessels were somewhere out there, in the shadows, hiding in the vast reaches of the Dream Realm or in the poisonous wilds of the waking world. Worst of all, the creature had learned and adapted, its act becoming almost indistinguishable from normal humans.

Several Citadels had already fallen after being infiltrated by Skinwalker, and if rumors were true, several cities in the Eastern Quadrant had, as well. That was why there were new security measures everywhere humans lived, aimed at preventing similar tragedies from happening again.

Apart from the appearance of the Dream Gates and the great wave of colonization that followed, the existence of Skinwalker had caused the single most significant change, perhaps, in how humans lived after the Chain of Nightmares.

So, Rain didn't mind being checked while entering Ravenheart. If she had indeed been taken by the harrowing fiend, the flower the beautiful Master summoned would have wilted, alerting her to the presence of a pretender.

There was one thing she did not quite understand, though…

Once Rain walked far enough from the gate, she whispered:

"Teacher… can I ask you a question?"

The answer came almost immediately:

"You sure can."

She lingered for a moment.

"What would they have done if I was truly a vessel of Skinwalker? A cohort of Awakened and a single Master… no matter how powerful she is, a Great Nightmare Creature can wipe them out in seconds. They would have stood no chance."

This time, there was a longer pause before her teacher answered:

"...Have you noticed a bronze mirror installed on the wall behind them?"

Rain nodded.

"Sure. There are mirrors like that everywhere in Ravenheart."

He sighed.

"They would have asked the mirror to help. That is already more than you should know, so don't ask anything else."

Rain couldn't help but throw a startled glance at her shadow.

They would have… asked the mirror to help?

'Don't tell me…'

Did her teacher's irrational fear of mirrors have an actual reason behind it?

Unsure what to think, Rain dove into the bustling labyrinth of Ravenheart's streets. Since the mundane district was sprawled on the slope of the volcano, it was divided into many vertical levels — not unlike the terrace neighborhood in NQSC where she had grown up.

Granted, the terraces that had been carved on the black slope were of a much greater scale, supporting numerous buildings and housing millions of people. The lower levels were where most of the work took place, while the higher levels were mostly residential.

Additionally, the more affluent neighborhoods were situated closer to the great bridge, while the poorer ones were situated further from it.

Rain's parents lived in one of the former, while her own den was in one of the latter. Actually, it was not too far from the city gate, which felt like a blessing today.

Dead tired, Rain found her way home, unlocked the door, and finally dropped the heavy pack.

A few minutes later, she crawled under her warm fur blanket and closed her eyes. The moment her head hit the pillow, all thoughts disappeared from it.

Rain yawned, curled into a ball, and said drowsily:

"...Goodnight, teacher."

He responded a moment later:

"You too. Sleep tight."

Her teacher's familiar voice was like a lullaby. Knowing that he would protect her if anything happened at night, Rain allowed herself to relax, and comfortably fell into the embrace of sleep.

Chapter-1632: New Developments

Rain was woken up by the delicious smell of breakfast. She spent a few minutes in sweet drowsiness, enjoying the warmth of her bed and the softness of her pillow, then yawned and sat up.

Immediately after, she winced.

'Ouch.'

Her whole body was sore, which was not at all unfamiliar, but still unpleasant. The rigors of hunting Nightmare Creatures were not something a mundane body could handle easily, so she needed a few days of rest to recover from the fatigue.

…Unlike the Awakened, who could bounce back from straining themselves to the extreme in a matter of hours.

Whimpering pitifully, Rain climbed from under the furs and performed a few simple stretching exercises. When her stiff muscles relaxed a little, she sighed and finally went to the makeshift kitchen situated at the opposite side of her den, where the tantalizing aroma of freshly cooked food was coming from.

Rain's lair consisted of one rather spacious room and a modest bathroom. It was mostly below ground and did not get a lot of light, since the only window was situated near the ceiling. As a result, most of the space was drowning in deep shadows. It was also one of the reasons why the rent was so cheap.

Her bed took one of the corners, while the kitchen took another. The largest portion of the room was used for training, and lastly, the whole part near the entrance was meant for storing hunting spoils. The workbench where she mended her belongings and crafted new

equipment was also there, littered with various tools, materials, and feathers for fletching arrows.

It was a bit messy, and a bit too spartan. Few people would have wanted to live in a place like that, and Rain wasn't really living here either. Her time was usually divided equally between the den and her much more comfortable family home. Staying with her parents was nicer, but having a place of her own also felt good, not to mention provided endless convenience.

She wouldn't want her mom and dad to faint every time she came back to Ravenheart caked in blood and covered in bruises. They were already very disapproving of every decision she had made in the past few years. But what could she do? She couldn't really say that her shadow talked to her, teaching her how to kill Nightmare Creatures and telling her to do strange things.

Rain was already an adult and could make her own decisions now, anyway. She was twenty!

"Eat your breakfast before it gets cold, young lady. And don't forget your vegetables!"

Her teacher's voice made Rain flinch.

Pouting slightly, she sat down at the counter and moved the plate closer. Her sour expression did not last, though, swiftly replaced by delight. Rain was very hungry after the hunt — in just a few minutes, all the delicious things her teacher had prepared were gone.

Putting the utensils down, Rain said sedately:

"Thank you, teacher."

He was surprisingly good at cooking, for an evil deity. Rain never saw her teacher eat, but she suspected that he was secretly a gourmet... was that the reason he had chosen to haunt her? Because she stupidly recommended him a good brand of instant ramen once?

A cold voice scoffed from the shadows, sounding a little bashful nevertheless:

"What are you thanking me for? Proper nutrition is also a part of good training. This is actually nothing. Let me tell you, when I was about your age, I was dining on Great Monsters…"

After hearing that last part, Rain almost choked on water and glanced at her shadow fearfully.

'He's… he's joking. He must be joking. Is he joking?'

She stared at the shadow for a few moments, then hurriedly turned away.

Some time later, Rain left her den carrying the hide of the Stone Worm. She had left most of her weapons behind, but kept the tachi in a scabbard at her belt. No matter how safe the streets of Ravenheart were, she never parted with her sword.

There were a few errands Rain had to run.

First, she went to the town hall of the mundane district to report the completion of the mission. The Stone Worm had been harassing the farmers in the lowlands for a few weeks, so there was a reward set by the authorities for its extermination, which Rain now received with a wide smile.

There were a lot of tasks and missions issued by the town hall every day. Most issues were handled by the retainers of the royal clan or the servants of one of the vassal clans, but there were always things they didn't have time or numbers to handle promptly. Therefore, anyone could take on a task or two and receive a corresponding reward.

The town hall also handled many private missions, so there was never a lack of opportunities for unaffiliated talents. Of course, only Awakened took the combat missions. Unsurprisingly, Rain turned heads every time she came here, and every clerk knew her by name.

She had long learned to ignore the stares.

After receiving the reward, Rain studied the mission board for a while. She was not in a hurry to take on a new task, but it was a good way to stay informed about what was happening in and around the

city.

'A new road crew? Strange…'

It seemed that the royal clan was assembling a new road construction crew, but its scale seemed much greater than all the previous ones. The pay was also much higher, which made the offer extremely alluring. However, it seemed like hazard pay — the description implied a higher than usual danger level of the new job.

Strangely enough, there was no mention of what region of the Dream Realm the new road was meant to connect to. More than that, from what Rain knew, there were already crews building roads to all neighboring Citadels. So… where would this new one lead, exactly?

In any case, that was none of her business. Rain had no intention of trying to get hired as a worker, and no one would employ her as a guard. Still, a lot of Awakened would probably leave the city once the construction started, so that was something to account for…

Deep in thought, she left the town hall and headed to the lower levels of the district, where the largest market was located.

Descending a set of steep stairs cut into the dark slope of the volcano, she asked in a confused tone:

"Teacher, doesn't that new road crew seem strange? Where are they building a road to?"

He remained silent for a while, then laughed quietly.

"Strange? No, not at all. As for where they are going, that's simple enough to guess. They are going east."

Rain frowned.

East? There was nothing much east of Ravenheart, only the Death Zones. Granted, the Sword Domain lay beyond them, but that didn't change the fact. What was the point of building a road to a wild and deadly region of the Dream Realm?

Her teacher was not making any sense — which, admittedly,

happened quite often.

'He's just trying to sound smart to cover up his lack of knowledge. How clumsy!'

Smiling, Rain shook her head and continued descending the stairs.

Chapter-1633: Public Sentiment

The market was a large and lively place. Numerous stalls were set up in the open, with more respectable storefronts visible here and there. Almost anything could be bought here, starting with materials harvested from the carcasses of Nightmare Creatures and ending with rare items brought over from the waking world via the Dream Gate.

Weapons, home appliances, fashionable clothes, crafting tools — whatever one needed, it could probably be found here.

Of course, items of true quality were sold in other, more exclusive places. Some of the elite shops were not even situated in the mundane district, so potential customers had to brave the chilling cold of the Bridge or send Awakened retainers to complete the purchase. Still, most citizens of Ravenheart visited the market when they needed something.

Rain knew the place well, and swiftly made her way to the area where the harvested materials were sold. After haggling with a familiar merchant, she sold off the Stone Worm hide and weighed her coin purse in her hand, full of satisfaction.

With this payment and the reward she had received in the town hall, Rain was flush with money! Best of all, she had managed to bring the Stone Worm down without suffering any wounds, so she didn't even need to hire a healer. Healers were rare, and therefore prohibitively expensive. Awakened warriors were the ones habitually sustaining injuries, but they also had a lot of spending power.

Rain did not, so most of the money she had made in the past years ended up going toward her medical expenses.

But not today!

Whistling joyously, she left the market and made her way to one of

the many public baths in Ravenheart. Due to the volatile nature of the region, there were numerous hot springs here, and soaking in them had quickly become the favorite pastime of the citizens.

If there was such a thing as tourism in the Dream Realm, the capital of Song would definitely have been a popular destination due to its hot springs…

'Maybe in the future.'

Before entering the bathhouse, Rain stopped in a dark alley behind it. A shadow separated from her own and settled in the darkness, then waved casually. Leaving her teacher alone, she proceeded inside to enjoy some privacy.

'Aaahh…'

Soon, having taken a shower, Rain submerged her weary body into the hot water and felt the many pains bothering her dissolve in it. There were many mystical minerals in the mountains surrounding Ravenheart, so these springs were supposed to have healing effects. She didn't know how true that statement was, exactly, but visiting the baths was definitely both pleasant and reinvigorating.

She had mostly come here to clean herself, though. It wouldn't do to come home covered in sweat, grime, and the stench of blood. The cleaner and fresher Rain looked in front of her parents, the less they would worry about her. So, she made a habit of visiting a bathhouse after every hunt.

Still… it wouldn't harm anyone if she soaked in the hot water a bit more…

And maybe a bit more...

And maybe a bit more...

After all, was she pressed for time? No…

As Rain was relaxing with her eyes closed, she couldn't help but hear bits and pieces of conversations that other people were having around her.

A woman's voice was tinged with worry as she said:

"Have you heard about Valor?"

Another answered with confusion:

"Huh? Heard what?"

"The King of Swords! They say that he was actually replaced by a vessel of Skinwalker, all the way back in Antarctica!"

"Shhh, lower your voice! Have you gone crazy, to talk about a Supreme that way? That… that can't possibly be true."

"I'm telling you, it is! I heard it from my sister, who heard it from her neighbor, who heard it from an actual Master!"

"There is no way…"

"But it would explain a lot of things, wouldn't it? The resource shortages we're having. It's all because of those Valor people! It's like they want us to starve. And aren't they a bit strange? Why does everyone in the Sword Domain treat our Queen with such disrespect?

That nasty nickname they gave her…"

"Hmm. That is strange, indeed…"

"If their king is a vessel of that thing, then who knows how many people there have already been taken! Gods, it's so scary. We are lucky to have come to the Song Domain. I hope they stay far away from us."

"But my cousins are in the Sword Domain…"

"You must tell them to be careful, then!"

Rain shook her head and slid deeper into the water to block out the hushed conversation.

'Aren't they being ridiculous?'

Strangely enough, that ridiculous rumor was quite persistent. She had

heard some version of it many times already, almost as if someone was spreading it on purpose.

On the other hand, some hostility between the two Domains was inevitable. They were both still dependent on the waking world, after all, which meant that there was a competition for resources.

And competition bred resentment, especially when one's livelihood was at stake. Resentment, in turn, bred these kinds of rumors. Plus, a vast majority of mundane humans living in the Dream Realm had come from Antarctica — they were traumatized and anxious, sometimes letting fear get the better of them.

In any case, the public opinion of the Sword Domain was slowly changing for the worse in Ravenheart. There was nothing like that four years ago, but now, such sentiments were not uncommon.

'Why can't they just be happy that someone else is doing well?'

Rain threw the two scaredy women out of her head and tried to enjoy herself in peace.

Eventually, she emerged from the bathhouse looking as smooth and pink as a newborn baby. The rugged leather outfit was stuffed into her pack, replaced by much more casual, neat and tidy civilian clothes.

The frightful monster huntress was gone, replaced by an innocent and lovely young woman.

If the group of young Awakened she had met at the city gate saw her, they would probably not believe their eyes.

Feeling a bit strange in her simple dress, Rain put on an ashcoat made from light, beautifully embroidered fabric. Pulling down its hood, she went to the dark alley, retrieved her teacher, and headed toward the upper levels of the city.

She was going home.

Chapter-1634: Scenic View

Rain stopped at a popular bakery and spent a good chunk of her coins on a set of delicious pastries. Her younger siblings were moody teenagers now, but… she still liked to pamper them, when she got the chance. Or at least try to.

Teenagers, sadly, were not easy to pamper.

'They're probably off to school already…'

Letting out a sigh, Rain walked along the steep streets of Ravenheart while enjoying the weather. It was on the colder side today, but the air was crisp and clear, not at all like the stale air of NQSC. There was no ash falling from the sky, either, so the breathtaking vista of the sprawling vertical city was not obscured.

Across the great stone bridge, a lonely peak pierced the sky, its slopes covered in snow. The beautiful palace of the Queen was hidden by a blizzard, though, so Rain could not enjoy its dark awe and splendor.

Her thoughts slowly drifted to the Awakened Nightmare Creature she was meant to find and slay. What Class would it be? How long would the preparations take her? What strategies would she employ, and what contingencies should she put in place?

Would she even survive that fight?

Thinking about that somberly, she ascended rather high. Now, she only had to get closer to the Bridge, and she would be home.

But before Rain reached the neighborhood where her parents lived, she noticed a crowd of people gathered on one of the scenic observation platforms. She stopped to listen to what they were talking about, curious to find out what the matter was.

Their voices sounded excited:

"Are you sure that he is coming back today?"

"I'm sure! He already delivered the last of this year's Sleepers to the cities in the south. There's nothing left for him to do but return."

"I'm so excited! I missed the day he departed, so I didn't see!"

"I saw. I want to see it again, though…"

Rain tilted her head, confused.

Who were they waiting for?

Her teacher suddenly mumbled in a subdued tone:

"Gods, how is it even worse now…"

Did she imagine it, or did his voice sound a little… grumpy?

Before Rain could ask, though, a swift shadow suddenly streaked across the city.

She looked up just in time to see a wondrous creature sailing through the sky. The weather was clear, so she could witness it even from a distance…

It was a dragon.

A beautiful dragon was flying above Ravenheart. Its somber scales were the color of the midnight sky, and with sparks of sunlight reflecting on them, the great beast was like a piece of starlit night that moved across the bright heavens. Its wings were open, casting a vast shadow, and it was that shadow that Rain had noticed.

A chorus of excited voices washed over her a moment later.

"It's him!"

"Night Singer!"

"Nightingale!"

"The Dragon Slayer!"

Indeed, the magnificent creature was Saint Kai, the Dragon Slayer. He had arrived a few weeks ago and then left to search for Sleepers scattered across the Song Domain during the winter solstice. Now, it seemed, the search was over.

Rain watched as the beautiful dragon flew across the great bridge and landed gracefully in front of the obscured palace. Soon, its great body disappeared into the blizzard.

She let out a quiet sigh, feeling a strange mix of emotions.

Funnily enough… she actually knew Saint Kai.

One of her tutors had some kind of relationship with the famous idol, so Saint Kai — although he wasn't even a Saint back then — had graciously agreed to give her a few archery lessons. Later, when he Transcended and became one of the pillars of the government forces, their paths crossed a couple of times because of her father.

Rain's father had nothing to do with battling Nightmare Creatures, but he was one of the senior government liaisons in Ravenheart. His work was administrative and mostly had to do with logistics, but still, that meant meeting exalted figures quite often.

In fact, Rain was familiar with Saint Jet that way, as well.

'Come to think of it…'

Wasn't it weird how many famous people she knew? Rain had even spent some time with Lady Changing Star herself! Of course, she was most comfortable with Effie… Saint Raised by Wolves… who for some reason used to live just a couple of houses down the street, back in NQSC.

Sadly, the government Saints spent most of their time in the waking world, and when they came to the Dream Realm, each was assigned to a specific region. Effie was far away, in Bastion, so they had not seen each other in a while.

The same went for Lady Nephis and Lady Cassia, both of whom had

been kind to Rain in the past.

Of course…

All these renowned people might have been Transcendent warriors, but which one of them could claim to be a dark deity? In a sense, the weirdness of knowing her teacher toppled all her other strange acquaintances, combined.

In any case, Rain was just that — a passing acquaintance in the lives of these exalted figures. She doubted they really remembered her, let alone had thought about her sometimes.

Why would they think about an insignificant mundane girl?

Her teacher, on the other hand, thought about her too much! It was hard to escape his nagging…

'Maybe I'll meet them again after becoming an Awakened.'

Throwing one last glance into the distance, where the graceful figure of the black dragon had disappeared, Rain turned away and continued on her way home.

Soon, she reached a pretty two-story house, opened the door, and walked inside with a bright smile.

"...Mom! Dad! I'm home!"

***

Unknown to Rain, the figure of her teacher lingered outside, staring across the great bridge from the shadows.

Just at that moment, the snowstorm subsided, and the beautiful palace of black obsidian revealed itself on the steep mountain slope.

Sunny studied its breathtaking beauty for a few moments, and then pursed his lips a little.

His gaze was dark.

"Jade Palace…"

Being that close to another of Ariel's creations was rather uncomfortable.

Of course, it was also one of the reasons he had come to Ravenheart...

Chapter-1635: Message to Myself

A few days before, far away from the harsh splendor of Ravenheart, Sunny was looking at Cassie while hiding his emotions behind a polite smile.

"Oh, and by the way…"

Her tone was neutral.

"...Happy Birthday."

For a split second, his mask cracked.

Sunny's face did not move, but his gaze changed. For a short moment, his eyes were much deeper and darker than before — the lightless depth contained within them was much too vast, much too cold, and much too unfathomable to fit the image of a harmless shopkeeper.

He froze, a storm of emotions raging in his heart. For a second, Sunny was stunned, not knowing what to say.

The shadows stirred.

But then, he quickly composed himself.

"Why, thank you. But how did you know?"

An irrational, but desperate hope had ignited in his chest, trying to burn away his judgment. A hope that someone — anyone — remembered him… that Cassie did. The thought of it was both blindingly sweet and ruthlessly painful.

Because it was impossible. The [Fateless] Attribute, as he had called it, was thorough. So, Sunny discarded that futile hope and hid his

rattled state.

How had she known that today was his birthday, though?

'Maybe… just maybe…'

Cassie was facing him, remaining silent. Her smile slowly dimmed, replaced by a strange and solemn expression. Sunny felt uncomfortable because her eyes were hidden by the blue fabric, but he did not show it.

Come to think of it…

He had not noticed it immediately, but Cassie looked a little strange.

How could he describe it? She seemed a little… haggard.

Of course, a stranger would not have noticed, blinded by the stunning beauty of the blind seer. But to Sunny, she looked out of sorts. Her clothes, which had always been neat and tidy, were a little messy. Her hair was like a waterfall of pale gold, but it did not seem properly combed. There were signs of fatigue on her delicate face.

Much more importantly, there was a hint of restless intensity to her which had never been there before. As if Cassie was… not quite stable, having lost her innate state of composed balance.

Sunny had seen all the other members of the cohort after returning, even if from afar, but it was his first time seeing Cassie. The blind seer seemed to have changed a lot.

She finally turned away and walked a few steps, as if studying the dining hall of the Brilliant Emporium.

"It's strange. I've been delivered a note asking me to find a person named Sunless and wish him a happy birthday. On a winter solstice, of all days. It happened a while ago. But, the strangest part? The sender of the note… was me.

And I don't remember ever writing it."

Sunny remained silent, wanting her to say more. Sometimes, silence

was the best way to make people talk.

The faint hope in his heart had been extinguished. Cassie did not remember… however, she seemed to have known that she would not remember. And therefore, she had made arrangements for them to meet, before the Third Nightmare.

He suddenly felt stifled.

Cassie traced her fingers across one of the tables and turned her head slightly.

"Sunless is a rather peculiar name, so I didn't think that finding him would be difficult. But, to my surprise… that person didn't seem to exist. Not in the government databases, Academy records, or the archives of the Great Clans. You might not know it, Master Sunless, but I am a rather knowledgeable person. One might even say that there's no one better at collecting information than me."

Sunny tilted his head a little.

Oh, he knew.

"That is indeed strange."

His voice was pleasant and even.

She smiled.

"A person named Sunless had not existed in either of the two worlds… until this year, when you found your way to Bastion. Naturally, I was curious. So, I studied you a little. I hope you don't mind."

Sunny hesitated. Even if he did mind, no one in their right mind would rebuke Song of the Fallen, a prominent Saint and one of the most valued seneschals of the Great Clan Valor.

Cassie turned her head left and right, as if looking around.

"I must admit, you are a fascinating man. Not only do you seem to have appeared out of nowhere, but your establishment is even built

inside of an Ascended Devil. How inventive."

He tensed.

Well… it wasn't a surprise. Cassie's Dormant Ability allowed her a measure of insight into all living things. Marvelous Mimic was not an exception, so she would have realized its nature as soon as she approached the Brilliant Emporium.

And yet she had stepped into the maw of an Ascended Devil without much worry. Was it confidence or indifference? Sunny was not sure.

He coughed.

"Ah. Well, why not? My house might not be able to fly like your Citadel, but it can walk. It's convenient."

The more important question was… what did she see when looking at him? Weaver's Mask was all the way in Godgrave, and while the Nebulous Mantle could hide his presence, it was nowhere near as potent at deflecting divination.

Nevertheless, Sunny was not worried. He was mostly certain that Cassie's powers were based on a subconscious ability to perceive the strings of fate, and sense when they were trembling. Since there were no strings of fate connected to him anymore, she should be powerless against him.

As if to confirm his thoughts, Cassie spoke calmly:

"Do you know what I sense when I look at you, though? Nothing. You are like a black void, completely empty."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"That is not something a man wants to hear on his birthday, Saint Cassia."

She did not seem to have heard his words, continuing in the same tone:

"But this is perfect. This is exactly what I've been looking for. Oh,

Master Sunless… you seem to be strangely well-informed about my abilities, considering that you are not at all surprised to hear these things. Well, just in case, let me tell you… I used to be able to see the future."

He hesitated for a while, a little startled by that statement.

"...Used to?"

Cassie nodded.

"Yes. This ability of mine has been in complete disarray after my Third Nightmare. Not just mine, actually… all Awakened with high affinity to fate are suffering a reduction in their ability to discern the future. Not that there are a lot of us. It is almost as if fate itself has been thrown into chaos."

Sunny forced out a smile.

"How terrible."

She remained silent for a while, seemingly distracted. Then, she said with a subtle hint of relief:

"Yes. It has been rather terrible. And I've been… I've been trying to find the cause for the past four years, without any success. So, the message that I seem to have sent myself made me think that you might be of help. And won't just think that I am crazy."

Cassie paused, then faced him and said tensely:

"Master Sunless… how would you react if I told you that there is a man-shaped hole in the world?"

Chapter-1636: Man-Shaped Void

Sunny remained motionless for a few moments.

The expression on Cassie's face… was tense and somber. Defiant, even. As if she was saying something that she had said many times already, only to be dismissed. Or even branded as a lunatic.

Sunny knew the feeling.

He sighed, then pointed to the nearest table.

"Have a seat. I sense that it's going to be a long conversation, so let me make you something to drink."

He took a step back and retreated to the kitchen. He could have manifested an avatar instead, but really, Sunny needed a few minutes to collect himself.

'A man-shaped hole in the world…'

Indeed, to someone else, his absence would have felt like that. It was just that no one was able to remember witnessing the inexplicable void where a man named Sunless used to be.

Cassie, however…

Although she didn't seem to know the solution, she had somehow pieced the problem together. She knew that something was wrong — with her, with everyone else, and with the world itself. But no matter how hard she tried, she could not prove it. She couldn't even remember trying to solve the problem.

That must have been maddening. Not to mention the fact that her ability to perceive the future had suddenly betrayed her, leaving Cassie without another of her senses. The past four years must have

been rough for her…

And yet, selfishly, Sunny was glad. He shamefully felt a warmth in his heart.

He wasn't quite remembered. But it felt so good, for his absence to be witnessed by someone, at least.

A few minutes later, he emerged from the kitchen with a teapot and a couple cups. Cassie was sitting at one of the tables, waiting. Her exquisitely beautiful face was calm, but he could feel a hint of agitation underneath that facade.

Placing a cup in front of her, Sunny poured the tea and sat down.

"A man-shaped hole? You might want to explain, Saint Cassia."

She took the cup and tilted her head a little. At that moment, Sunny realized that he had made a mistake… in an attempt to hide his rattled state, he had been acting much too calm throughout their conversation. No Master would have been that calm in front of Song of the Fallen, let alone while hearing her say such outrageous things.

He was suddenly unhappy with himself.

'What a glaring oversight.'

Since deceit was his craft, Sunny felt ashamed.

Cassie touched the cup and traced its shape with her finger. When she spoke, her voice sounded even calmer than his:

"Actually, it's not that strange. All of us… the members of Changing Star's cohort… have long realized that something had happened to us in the Third Nightmare. There are things that don't quite make sense, as if there are gaps in our memory. No, not gaps… it's like parts of our memories are corrupted. Not in the Everlasting Void kind of way, but rather in a very mundane way.

Like what happens with old communicators."

Sunny stared at her silently. His silence prompted her to continue:

"However, there were a lot of bizarre things that happened to us in the Nightmare, some of them much more so. And because it is almost impossible to remember that there is something that we have forgotten, we simply accepted it as fact and moved on after a while. That is how memory works, anyway. People don't remember what they have forgotten, and therefore don't usually realize it."

He shifted slightly, noticing something strange about her words.

It was indeed impossible to keep any thoughts about his past. People had not only forgotten him, but they couldn't even remember thinking about having forgotten him. That was the insidious part of becoming fateless.

And yet, Cassie was perfectly capable of pinpointing the problem. How?

Sunny took a breath.

"But you don't seem to have a problem with being aware of the missing memories?"

Cassie smiled faintly.

"Hardly. It is very problematic, in fact. But... my Aspect is uniquely suited to remembering. My powers, you see, have to do with memories. I have a great level of control over my own memory, which has become much greater than before.

I can also collect the memories of other people, or even replace and manipulate them."

Sunny shivered. What an insidious power it was…

It had to be a facet of Cassie's Transformation Ability, then. She had not been capable of these things before — only Torment was.

…He couldn't help but wonder if this was the first time they were having this conversation, even, or if Cassie had simply erased his memory of meeting her, who knew how many times before.

But no, that should not have been the case. Even such a subtle power

had to have a limit, and his Rank and Class would place him beyond that limit.

Enough so, at least, for him to at least be aware of having been manipulated.

'Right?'

Oblivious to his subtle reaction or pretending not to notice it, Cassie continued:

"So, you might see how I would be more sensitive to anomalies in my memory. Which was why, unlike the others, I couldn't stop trying to get to the bottom of things. Especially because fate itself seemed to be in total chaos."

He took a sip of his tea.

"I'm sorry, but what does fate have to do with any of this?"

Cassie's smile grew a little wider.

"Oh... everything. You see, I always wanted to destroy fate. To create a weapon that could cut it. I always wanted to, but strangely enough, I don't recall ever acting on my desire. You must think that I'm a really timid person."

Sunny wanted to point out that confessing all these intimate things to a stranger was a bit odd, but decided against it and simply shook his head.

Cassie's smile suddenly disappeared. Her tone turned colder, as well:

"But I am not a timid person, Master Sunless. Far from it. So, I can't help but think that, maybe, I have actually succeeded in creating that weapon. It's just that I don't remember it. In any case… I spent years trying to place the missing pieces together and restore my memory. It was… a bit of a hardship, to say the least.

I failed to achieve my goal, but I did learn something."

She took a deep breath.

"It's that the missing pieces form a person. Someone who was there, with us, in the Tomb of Ariel… and maybe even earlier than that. A man who has been cut from the world, as if he had never existed. Someone who was… precious to us. To me."

She leaned forward, almost overturning her tea.

"So, Master Sunless…"

Before she could continue, he asked neutrally:

"You say that the missing pieces form a person. But why are you so sure that it is a man? It might very well be a woman, no?"

Cassie remained silent for a moment, then said tensely:

"Because I think that you are that man."

Then, she clenched her fists.

"Are you?"

Sunny did not answer for a while.

Eventually, he sighed and answered, his voice even:

"...Yes."

Then, he took a sip of tea and smiled bitterly.

"But it doesn't matter if I confirm it. You won't remember, anyway."

Cassie continued to lean forward. A stunned expression contorted her delicate face for a moment, then disappeared, replaced by momentary confusion and then tense anticipation.

"So… are you?"

Sunny turned away, hiding an ugly grimace.

There was no point. It was not as if he had not tried to confess his existence to the people he knew before. He had, on several occasions. But just like his past, they could not retain the information about his

connection to their lost memories of him.

His confessions were destined to be forgotten, just like he had been.

Funnily enough, he could admit to being Rain's brother — because her neighbor Sunny never had, and the concept of an older brother was thus not connected to her memories of him.

He sighed and answered again:

"Yes, I am."

Sunny waited for a moment. After Cassie had forgotten his answer and before she could ask the question again, he interrupted her:

"Instead of that, do you want to tell me more about that Memory you want me to make? Is it a weapon?"

Chapter-1637: Negative Space

Sunny tried to evade the question a few more times, but it was too important to Cassie. She stubbornly returned to it no matter what he said, forgetting his answers a few moments later. Watching her lost expression was eerie and a little heartbreaking, like talking to someone suffering from dementia.

"So, tell me… are you?"

Sunny reminded himself to be patient. There were many suitable ways to prevent her from voicing the question. He just needed to find the correct one.

"Yes, I am. But..."

Cassie was stunned, then confused, then tense once more.

'Maybe I should distract her with a revelation or two about what is going on in Ravenheart?'

However, in the end, he did not have to.

Somehow, Cassie did not repeat herself again. Instead, she shifted slightly, reached for her tea cup, and traced its shape with her finger. Her face froze, and she fell quiet.

After a few moments of silence, Cassie said evenly:

"...My tea is cold."

Sunny tilted his head a little. Then, his eyes gleamed in the darkness.

It seemed that there was no need to guide her away from the question, after all.

'So soon?'

Cassie was smart. She could not remember that which was forgotten, but she noticed the change in the temperature of her tea. Therefore, instead of remembering, she simply deduced that something had been erased from her memory.

The gears of her formidable mind were spinning now, connecting the negative space in her memory with the details of the conversation they were having. Observing the void and inferring its meaning.

Knowing Cassie, there were countless conjectures being formed in her head. Dozens of theories were being built, scrutinized, and discarded. Only those that could not be effectively disproven remained, leading to several parallel branches of assumptions. Those assumptions were then pitted against each other, turning into conclusions.

The conclusions were used to extrapolate what, exactly, she had forgotten.

'...Too smart, maybe.'

It was a little scary.

Sunny did not say anything, carefully exploring his own emotions. If he was right, then Cassie not only knew that a person was missing from the world, but also deduced that he was that person, or at least connected to them.

She would not be sure, but suspect it strongly.

And he... he had come closer to being known to someone than he had ever been since leaving the Nightmare. Of course, there was a vast difference between a suspicion and a memory — but it was precisely because Cassie's inference was based solely on deduction and not remembrance that she could retain it.

The taste of his tea was suddenly incredibly fragrant. Sunny drank it silently.

Neither of them spoke for a long time.

Cassie's delicate face was full of somber intensity, but she did not rush to ask him any questions. She couldn't. Because asking him

about all the things she wanted to know would only result in her forgetting the answers.

It was an odd situation.

Eventually, she sighed and turned away. A few moments later, Cassie asked, her voice a little strange:

"Would you... like to look into my eyes?"

He was startled by the question.

'Where did that come from?'

Sunny hesitated, not knowing how to answer.

"I'm honestly not sure. Why are you asking?"

She touched her blindfold briefly, sighed, and said with a hint of reluctance:

"My Transformation Ability has to do with my eyes. Few people know about it, and you are now one of them. If you look into my eyes… I'll be able to read your memories."

Sunny blinked.

His first reaction was to reject her vehemently. Who would want their private memories to be exposed to a stranger? Not to mention the fact that Cassie's power was not limited to that. She had already admitted that she could also erase, replace, and manipulate the memories of other people.

That sounded utterly terrifying. Sunny had suspected that there were limits to her power, and now, she had exposed one of these limits to him — only those who looked Cassie in the eyes could be enthralled by her Ability. So why would he expose himself to that power?

She would forget everything she saw just like she had forgotten his answers, as well.

'Not everything.'

The memories of his past were forbidden, but the memories of everything that had happened to him after the Third Nightmare were less so.

The question was, what benefit would there be if Cassie saw it all?

She would probably be able to fill the empty void left by him with a few more pieces of logical reasoning, at least.

But then what?

Sunny put his cup down and smiled politely.

"You want to peek at my memories, Saint Cassia?"

She simply nodded, not hiding her desire.

"I do… Saint Sunless."

His smile did not falter.

'She has already connected me to the Exploration Report on the Tomb of Ariel and guessed that I was in the Nightmare with them. Damn it… I shouldn't have published it.'

But he did not really regret his actions. That report was both for Teacher Julius and Ananke, so it was worth the trouble.

Sunny chuckled, then asked with a hint of amusement in his voice:

"What's in it for me?"

Cassie leaned back and remained silent for a few moments. She might have guessed that he was the person she had been looking for, but she had no idea who he was. What were his motives, desires, and convictions? What was his past, and what was his vision of the future?

What could she offer him to gain his cooperation?

She couldn't even be sure if he was a friend or a foe.

"Well, what is it that you want?"

Sunny contemplated for as long as his Flaw allowed him to.

"Actually, there is something that you can help me with. I must warn you, though… the favor I'll ask might land you in hot water with your venerable superiors from Clan Valor."

He shrugged.

"Additionally, you will only access a memory of my choosing. You'll have to wait a bit, too. It can only be done on a full moon."

Cassie suddenly tensed.

"A full moon? Surely, you don't mean…"

Sunny chuckled.

"That's right. I want to sneak into Bastion."

He finished his tea and added nonchalantly:

"The real Bastion, of course. Not this mirage we all live in."

Chapter-1638: Pretty as a Picture

It did not take long to discuss the details of their agreement with Cassie. She was wary of him, somewhat, but Sunny held the overwhelming advantage in the negotiations. After all, he had what she wanted, and knew more than her on top of that. It wasn't hard for him to get the blind seer to agree to his conditions.

She could not stay for long, either — at least not without risking her absence being noticed by someone from Clan Valor. Cassie did not want to attract their attention to Sunny, yet, or maybe ever. That suited him fine, as well.

'What a strange birthday I'm having this year…'

When Cassie left, Sunny was once again left alone in the Brilliant Emporium. The city had grown dark, and a peaceful silence settled over the lake. He could see the magnificent castle shine with enchanted lights in the distance, the lanterns reflecting in the calm water like stars.

…Of course, that castle was just an illusion.

Or rather, not just an illusion, but a very special one. The kind of illusion that was, for all intents and purposes, real — more real than reality itself, even. Most of the people who lived inside the castle did not know the difference, since it did not affect their lives.

But Sunny knew.

There was a different kind of place hidden behind the beautiful, towering edifice of Bastion. A much more somber and terrifying place than what everyone was familiar with.

That was where he wanted to get to with Cassie's help.

...There were six strongholds depicted on the map Nether had left in the Ebony Tower, each connected to one of the daemons. After visiting the tower once more and reading more of the forbidden runes surrounding the map, Sunny was keenly interested in exploring each of these strongholds. One could even say that the shape of his life depended on it.

The Ivory Tower had once belonged to Hope. The Tomb of Ariel was the burial site of Oblivion. Sunny had already visited these two places, but the other four…

Nether's own seat of power was hidden in the Hollow Mountains. He had barely survived crossing over them, and was not nearly powerful enough, yet, to dare delving into the darkness that dwelled below them. True darkness was the natural enemy of shadows, after all.

Which left only three daemonic strongholds for him to explore. Coincidentally — or maybe not quite so — each of them was now a Great Citadel ruled by one of the most powerful Legacy clans.

The Jade Palace, now known as Ravenheart, was connected to the Demon of Dread. Sunny had been searching for a way to infiltrate Queen Song's palace, but without much luck. It was guarded too well.

The seafaring Citadel of the House of Night, meanwhile, was temporarily out of reach — he did not have a spare avatar to go there.

More precisely, quantity was not the problem. It was just that sustaining avatars cost him essence. The Lord of Shadows remained manifested permanently, but that guy also spent most of his time inside the Fragment of the Shadow Realm. Out there, the spirit essence was rich and nourishing — unless his third avatar was battling powerful abominations, he was like a perpetual essence generator.

The avatar accompanying Rain mostly hid in her shadow, but had to be controlled at all times. In the end, Sunny was maintaining a positive balance between expending and replenishing essence while

constantly keeping these two versions of himself going, with plenty left in reserve for unexpected situations. Sending an additional avatar to Stormsea would have put a strain on that balance.

So, he had decided to leave the Great Citadel of the House of Night, which was connected to the Demon of Repose, alone for the time being.

Which only left Bastion, which had once belonged to the Demon of Imagination.

Sunny did not know much about that particular daemon, but he or she seemed to have possessed truly fantastical powers. From what he could tell, the Demon of Imagination had been a master of illusions. Anything imagined by that daemon was like a mirage, and those mirages could easily become reality… or even replace it.

Bastion had always seemed like an illustration from a fairy tale, and in a sense, it was. The beautiful castle, the tranquil lake, the picturesque land surrounding it — all of it had been conjured from the imagination of the ancient daemon. The Demon of Imagination was long dead, but the illusion that replaced reality still remained.

It had even become home to millions of people.

Sunny could not find what he was looking for in the pretty mirage, though. He could only find it in the harrowing reality hidden behind it.

That place could only be entered during a full moon — at least by those who did not rule the illusory Citadel. That was why he agreed to meet Cassie again then.

There was plenty of time left before the next full moon, though, which would give both of them plenty of time to digest the situation. Cassie had a lot to think about, no doubt.

And Sunny did, too.

Throwing one last glance in the window, he yawned and went about closing the Brilliant Emporium. When everything was done, Sunny walked into his bedroom and fell on his bed.

Despite the modest size of his room, the bed itself was large and opulent. It was carved from pale polished wood, with elegant engravings decorating the columns that supported the silk canopy. It was much too comfortable for a simple piece of furniture, and looked like something that belonged in a palace instead of a cozy cottage.

And it did. This was the very same bed Sunny had slept on in the ruined cathedral of the Dark City, a lifetime ago. He had brought it back with the help of the Marvelous Mimic after being gone from civilization for three years — among other things.

Sunny put his head on a pillow and closed his eyes. Soon enough, he fell peacefully asleep.

The last thought that crossed his mind was rather bitter:

'Damnation... she forgot to order a Memory!'

It was such a shame. He had hoped to get a bunch of soul shards out of Cassie...

Chapter-1639: Beautiful Mirage

The full moon came faster than Sunny had expected. His life in Bastion had been peaceful in the meantime — the Brilliant Emporium Café enjoyed a steady stream of guests, while the Memory Boutique continued to stagnate with no customers. Sunny attended to the kitchen and minded his business.

He was supposed to make a trip to the waking world to stock up on ingredients, but postponed it for now — partially out of laziness, and partially because there was a lot on his plate.

His life in Godgrave, meanwhile, had undergone an earth-shattering transformation. Nephis was there, and so, he had no time for boredom.

But that was the third avatar's problem.

On the day of the full moon, Sunny let Aiko go home a bit earlier and closed the Brilliant Emporium. Then, he walked through the crowded streets of Bastion and bought a ticket to a theater play. A troupe of Awakened actors was performing a rendition of A Song of Light and Darkness… sadly, Sunny only noticed the name of the play after being seated in the parterre.

He covered his face with a palm and winced as if suffering from a toothache, but remained in his seat. Soon, excited members of the audience surrounded him from all sides. The lights were dimmed, the curtain was lifted, and the play began…

No one noticed that a pale young man sitting in one of the first rows did not seem to have a shadow.

At the same time, a different incarnation of Sunny was hiding in the darkness near the shore of the lake. It was already dark, and the pale moon was traveling across the starlit sky. The sight of it — the moon,

the velvet sky, the silhouette of the magnificent castle, and the vast lake — was beautiful beyond words.

In fact, it seemed as if there were two moons, one lost in the distant heavens, the other drowning in the silent water.

Making sure that no one was nearby, Sunny rose from the shadows and walked toward the shore. The incarnation in the theater was wearing the Nebulous Mantle, so he was only dressed in a mundane military bodysuit. The Quintessence Pearl was already summoned, resting in his mouth.

He did not waste any time and dove into the water without making a splash.

The lake took him into its cold embrace.

Sunny allowed his body to become as heavy as a stone, sinking to the bottom. Once there, he extended his senses, turned into a shadow, and glided down a steep slope.

The lake surrounding Bastion did not seem special from the shore, but it was immensely deep. By the time the slope lost most of its steepness, Sunny was already several kilometers below the surface. A mundane human would not have been able to withstand the pressure of the mass of water, but it was easy for someone like him, especially because he remained incorporeal.

The easy part stopped there, though. Because these waters were not safe.

There were Echoes of powerful Nightmare Creatures patrolling the lake. As if that was not enough, there were also swords thrust into mud here and there — each of them serving as the eyes and ears of the master of this land... Supreme Anvil of Valor, the King of Swords.

Reaching the castle unnoticed was nearly impossible.

However, Sunny had not wasted the last year in vain. He had thoroughly explored the lake, studying its guardians and mapping out the locations of Anvil's swords. By now, he was confident in his ability to reach the castle unnoticed.

The castle was not his target, anyway.

Instead, it was the reflection of the moon traveling across the surface of the lake.

He hid in the shadows and waited for a vast creature that looked like a giant silver eel to swim past him, then cautiously advanced forward. Changing direction, Sunny moved like a thief, effortlessly avoiding every security measure placed at the bottom of the lake by Clan Valor.

By the time he reached the midpoint between the shore and the castle, the play his avatar was watching reached intermission. The other Sunny rose from his seat and went to the theater's cafe, making sure to be seen by as many people as possible. Of course, he kept to the dark corners to make the absence of his shadow hidden.

The original Sunny hid at the bottom of the lake without moving. Proceeding further would be… problematic. So, he was letting the reflection of the moon come to him instead.

He was sure that someone like Beth would have been infuriated by such a statement, considering that, scientifically speaking, the position of the moon's reflection was supposed to depend on the perspective of the observer. But not of this moon, in this lake, and on this night.

When it was time, Sunny made himself as light as a feather, assumed his human form, pushed off the bottom of the lake, and swam up. The timing was calculated to a split second — the Echoes patrolling the lake were far away, and no one would be able to notice his swift rise.

As the pressure of the water lessened, the darkness surrounding him grew brighter. Soon, he was surrounded by ethereal radiance, as if swimming through moonlight. The moon itself was like a perfectly round silver disk hanging above Bastion.

Its reflection was like a vast, radiant circle resting on the calm water.

Breaking the surface a few meters away from it, Sunny swam forward

and entered that circle.

He was blinded by the light…

And then, the world changed.

Sunny had left the illusory realm behind and entered the ghost of reality hidden behind its splendor.

Suddenly, it was much darker. The reflection of the moon disappeared, replaced by scattered vestiges of bleak light. The water of the lake was much colder, and its surface was restless because of the strong wind.

Taking a deep breath, Sunny looked up.

Above him was a broken sky.

Chapter-1640: Harrowing Reality

The sky was black, with pale stars shining coldly in the distance. They were much paler than the bright constellations of the illusory realm, though, because there was something brighter in the night sky, spanning its vast expanse.

The fragments of the shattered moon.

The moon was up there, above him, but it was viciously broken into countless pieces. Some of them were vast, like jagged continents, floating in the forlorn darkness. Some were infinitely small, painting the sky like clouds of starlight vapor. The trail of moon shards formed a heavenly river that stretched beyond the horizon, illuminating the hidden world with ghostly light.

The sight of it was both terrifying and humbling. Sunny did not know what kind of blow could have been so harrowing as to fracture even the moon… or if the moon had been broken from within, like the shell of a cosmic egg… all he knew was that seeing the broken sky filled him with a deep sense of terror.

He rarely felt true fear after becoming a Transcendent, but the true face of Bastion was one of the few things that could still make him shudder.

Looking away from the celestial river, Sunny gazed at the distant castle. The castle existed both in the illusory world and in the terrifying reality. However, while it stood tall and proud in the former… it was a desolate ruin in the latter.

The mighty walls had collapsed. The tall towers were toppled. Bastion was like a mountain of fractured white stones, the shape of a once-magnificent citadel barely recognizable in its ghastly

crookedness. Here and there, one could still recognize the lines of partially unscathed buildings and courtyards, but they only seemed like an epitaph on a towering gravestone.

Across the lake, where the thriving city had been a moment before, a monumental wall of towering dark trees rose to the broken sky.

The illusory Bastion had been surrounded by a forest once, too — a forest that was one enormous living being, a horrid Titan with which the Knights of Valor had waged war for decades. Eventually, it was Anvil, still a Saint back then, who had destroyed it.

But here in the hidden reality, the forest was untouched, and there were many creatures inhabiting it that were much more terrifying than that Titan had been.

Because the real Bastion... was a Death Zone.

In fact, there were dreadful beings dwelling in the deep, dark lake as well.

There was one thing in common between the real Bastion and the beautiful mirage created by the Demon of Imagination, though. Both in the illusory castle and the real castle, enchanted lanterns were shining softly in the darkness of the night.

Granted, there were much fewer of them here.

'I need to hurry.'

The real lake was much more dangerous than its copy. Sunny was capable of facing its inhabitants in a battle, but he wasn't capable of doing so unnoticed. And so, he dove down once again, falling like a stone into the depths of the cold water.

The bottom of the lake was much different in this hidden, true world. Out in the illusory Bastion, it was rather mundane, covered by mud and rare stones.

Here, though…

A drowned city rested on the bottom of the lake. The graceful

buildings were constructed from the same white stone as the castle, and their empty windows were like dark eyes that watched Sunny as he passed by. The city must have been beautiful once, but now it was cold and empty, with signs of horrible devastation visible on every street.

The streets themselves were littered with bones. Countless human skulls lay on the cracked cobblestones, looking like pale fungus. Sunny did not know what doom had befallen the people of the drowned city, but he made sure to lighten his body and swim instead of walking on the ancient roads. He did not want to disturb them, and knew that it was dangerous to do so, on top of that.

The city was built at the foot of a tall mountain, which was now submerged in water, with only its peak rising above it. The ruins of the great castle lay on that peak.

That was also where Cassie was supposed to be waiting for him, too.

Sunny calmly traversed the fallen city, making sure to hide from its current inhabitants. There were plenty of harrowing Nightmare Creatures dwelling in the drowned ruins — he had studied their habits and hunting grounds before, but abominations of higher Ranks were supremely unpredictable.

Luckily, Sunny's ability to remain unseen and unsensed in the shadows had become much more potent since his days in the Dark City, so even these horrors could not easily spot him.

He moved closer and closer to the mountain. From time to time, grotesque carcasses appeared from the darkness, each impaled by a single straight sword.

This was Anvil's work — his domain extended into the real version of Bastion, as well, and although the King of Swords did not rule the entire area, he was the master of the ruined castle. Anything that tried to crawl out of the water and challenge him ended up dead.

Knights of Valor were often battling Nightmare Creatures in the forest, too. However, they were doing so without the support of their king. That was because he used the dark forest as a crucible to forge

better warriors for his army — the dreadful abominations inhabiting it were the whetstone against which Valor's elites were sharpened.

Sunny heard that after Antarctica, Morgan had been sent into the forest and ordered not to return until she redeemed her mistake. She eventually emerged from it two years later, as a Saint.

He did not know if this was true, and couldn't ask, because this information wasn't supposed to be known to any outsider to begin with.

…His preparations had not been in vain. Sunny followed a predetermined path and managed to reach the mountain without disturbing any of the Nightmare Creatures or stumbling upon any of Anvil's swords. Finally, he ascended the steep slope and cautiously surfaced near the ruins.

There were lanterns burning high above, on the remnants of the broken wall, and human silhouettes patrolling its length. They were Knights of Valor — the best of the best, each of them at least a Master.

Another human silhouette was standing on the edge of a toppled tower that lay on the ground, its roof protruding into the lake. This one did not carry a luminous lantern, waiting patiently in the darkness.

It was Cassie. Illuminated by the pale light of the shattered moon, motionless like a statue, her delicate figure looked even more arresting. Her beauty had already been breathtaking… here in the hidden realm of true Bastion, it seemed simply enthralling.

And yet, strangely enough, Sunny felt his gaze wandering away from her.

Somewhat surprised, he realized that it was her presence… unlike most Saints, it did not demand attention, but instead dampened it. It was really… more akin to absence than presence.

Perhaps it had been for a long while, but he simply did not notice it.

Forcing himself to concentrate on the slender figure, Sunny silently

emerged from the water and walked over to Cassie. He made no noise whatsoever, and yet, she turned her head slightly to face him.

"You've come."

Sunny dismissed the Quintessence Pearl and smiled in the darkness.

"Of course. It's not polite to make a lady wait. And I am nothing if not polite… one could say..."

Chapter-1641: First Impressions

Sunny studied Cassie's face, trying to guess what she was thinking about. Having left her alone for several weeks, he did not feel particularly… safe. Who knew what conclusions she had drawn in that time? What plans she had formulated? He was a stranger to her, now. Which meant that the blind seer would not afford him the same grace she afforded her friends.

Facing Cassie as someone she might perceive as a potential enemy… was a nerve-wracking experience. Sunny felt like he finally understood why Mordret was so wary of her.

…But then again, he was someone worthy of being feared, himself. He was powerful and lethal enough to be an existential threat to anyone who would dare stand in his way. Sunny did not have to be afraid of anyone, or any thing — instead, everyone had to be scared of him.

If they knew who he was, of course. But no one did, which only made him more terrifying.

'Well, no matter.'

It was not like he wanted to frighten Cassie. Sunny was pretty sure that she would treat him with sincerity — he had what she wanted, after all. Still, a relationship of a transactional nature was not the most stable. It was in his best interest to build a better connection with her… and maybe even reach a point where they shared mutual trust.

Sunny looked at Cassie, who was wearing a white tunic and a seawave cloak, her eyes hidden behind a strip of blue cloth. Then, he glanced at his own black bodysuit. The two of them did not exactly look like a natural pair. Currently, they were accomplices at best, not allies.

'So, how do I go about building trust?'

One small step at a time, most likely.

He looked at the shattered moon, then at the restless waters of the dark lake. Finally, he said:

"The ambiance here is truly lovely. However, the lake is rather dreadful. Wouldn't it be better if we left before something very terrible came out of the water to spoil the mood?"

Cassie remained silent for a moment, then smiled faintly.

"Didn't you come from the water yourself, Saint Sunless? Are you very terrible, as well?"

He coughed.

"Well… yes, I did. And yes, I guess I am."

She tilted her head slightly.

"I am surprised that you made it all the way here, actually. How did you traverse the lake without being torn apart? Or alerting anyone to your presence?"

That was an obviously probing question, but Sunny didn't mind. He shrugged and answered in a nonchalant tone:

"By being patient and very good at hiding."

She sighed lightly and turned around, walking slowly in the direction of the castle ruins.

"Let's go."

Sunny hesitated for a moment before following.

As he did, he looked up, at the figures patrolling the remnants of the toppled walls.

This was the problem he had not been able to solve yet.

Finding an entrance into the hidden realm had not been too hard. Avoiding the Echoes patrolling the lake and finding a path through the graveyard of swords at its bottom had not been much of a problem, either. Even traversing the dark depths of the true lake, where great horrors dwelled, was well within his power.

But getting inside the ruined castle itself was troublesome. There were many powerful Knights of Valor inside… there was the King of Swords himself, as well. Worse than that, the members of his clan were versed in runic sorcery. Their stronghold was protected by an array of enchantments that Sunny could not hope to unravel, let alone bypass silently.

He knew a thing or two about Hope's sorcery, but not nearly enough to compete with real experts.

That was why Sunny needed Cassie. Without help from inside the castle, it would take him years to infiltrate its ruins. He wasn't worried about being betrayed by her, either…

At this moment, as if reading his mind, the blind seer asked him with a hint of curiosity in her voice:

"Can I ask you a question, Saint Sunless?"

He glanced at her back.

"Sure. And, please… call me Sunny. Here in Bastion, I am known as the master of Sunny's Brilliant Emporium. A humble shopkeeper, and definitely not a Saint."

She remained silent for a moment.

"Why are you so sure that I won't surrender you into the hands of my clan? After all… here in Bastion, I am known as a loyal, obedient servant of the King. A virtuous Saint, and definitely not someone who would help an outsider infiltrate the very heart of our stronghold."

Sunny answered calmly, his voice tinged with a hint of amusement:

"It's because I know that you are actually disloyal, disobedient, and wicked."

Cassie suddenly coughed.

"...Ah."

He chuckled and added in a light tone:

"Just my kind of person. I am a bit of a treacherous bastard myself, to be honest."

She cleared her throat.

"I... see."

Cassie remained silent for a while after that, jumping off the toppled tower to land softly on the ground below. Sunny followed, suppressing the desire to slap himself across the face.

'What… what kind of nonsense am I spouting?'

Right now, Cassie only knew that he was a Saint that was somehow connected to her and Nephis, and had undergone the Third Nightmare with them. Which would suggest that he had been their friend, or at least an ally… if not for the fact that Mordret had also been there, in the Tomb of Ariel.

Meaning that not everyone who had entered that Nightmare was an ally. Cassie knew that Sunny had played a big role in her life, but she did not know what kind of role he had played. She had to account for the fact that he very well could have been her enemy… at the very least, she wouldn't be sure that he had been a friend.

So, why the hell was he willingly admitting to being a wretched traitor?

Sunny closed his eyes for a moment and then said, trying very hard to keep the embarrassment out of his voice:

"What I'm trying to say… is that everyone has their own interest. It is not in your self-interest to surrender me to Clan Valor, and I am pretty sure that you would not sacrifice yourself for their benefit. Otherwise, I would have been visited by a cohort of Knights and a few Paladins the very next day after your visit."

Cassie inhaled slowly.

"I see. That makes sense."

She paused for a moment, and then suddenly asked:

"What is your interest, then?"

Sunny smiled and looked at the broken sky.

"That is the question, isn't it?"

Chapter-1642: Selfish Reasons

Sunny contemplated his answer for a few moments, then said neutrally:

"I guess it's the same as yours."

Cassie seemed a little surprised.

"The same as mine?"

He nodded and glanced at her with hidden worry. They were climbing a slope of stone debris, the surface under their feet treacherous and uneven. Cassie seemed to be doing fine, but her movements were a little stiff.

No matter how well she had learned to live with her Flaw, she was still blind. Sharing other people's perception or sensing a few seconds into the future could not entirely replace sight. However, Sunny could not think of a way to support her on this treacherous slope — he could offer her his hand, but he doubted that she would accept it. They were not that close... now.

In the end, he did nothing.

"Indeed. You told me that you had always wanted to destroy fate… but that is not entirely true, is it? You wouldn't want to struggle against fate if it carried you to a wonderful outcome. The outcome you saw must be terrible… so, what you really want is to reach a desirable outcome, not destroy fate. The latter is merely a means to an end, while the former is the end. That is your interest."

Sunny shrugged.

"It is the same for me. My interest is to reach a desirable outcome."

Cassie hesitated for a moment.

"So what is the outcome you desire?"

He grinned.

"How can I know? It's too soon to talk about an outcome — I don't even know what will happen, let alone how I might want it to end. I merely have a few ideas. In any case, that question is better aimed at you, Saint Cassia. You are much better informed about the future than I am. So… what outcome do you desire?"

Now, they were on the right track. Mutual trust was the end goal, but it had to be built on the foundation of mutual benefit. To help each other benefit, they needed to know what each of them wanted.

What was it that Cassie desired?

Even after knowing her for so many years, Sunny was not sure. She had always kept her secrets close.

Which was why he did not expect to hear her honest response:

"I want to save the world."

Sunny almost tripped, startled.

"Wh—what?"

His eyes might have widened a little.

Cassie laughed quietly.

"Why are you so surprised? It's only reasonable. After all, I am a part of the world, and so are those people I care about — if the world is destroyed, everything I cherish will be destroyed with it. Alright, maybe I was a little grandiose in my statement… I do want to save the world, but purely for selfish reasons. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to say that I want to save myself.

It's just that one and the other are inseparable."

Sunny stared at her silently for a few moments.

"Should I take it as confirmation, then, that the world is doomed? Ah, it's a bit disconcerting. I did not expect to hear something like that from an oracle as powerful as you."

He looked at the shattered moon. The background was also very ominous.

Cassie shrugged.

"I suspect that you know perfectly well what fate awaits our world. It is obvious that the world is doomed… what most people don't realize is how little time we have left. Those who pay careful attention to the Nightmare Spell, though, do."

Sunny frowned.

Was she talking about the fact that their world would eventually be devoured by the Dream Realm? It would be natural to assume that Sunny knew, considering that she suspected that he had been on Aletheia's Island with them. More than that, it was no secret — the Great Clans had known, as well, which was why they were focused on conquering a new world instead of trying to save the old one.

Or was she talking about the Forgotten God and his inevitable awakening? The moment that ancient being struggled free of its slumber, the very existence could come undone at the seams, and the Everlasting Void could be unleashed from its prison.

…Or were these two events inseparable, as well?

He grimaced.

"So what are your immediate goals?"

Cassie smiled faintly.

"I don't think that we know each other well enough to share such details... Sunny. Maybe I'll tell you another day, after learning more about you from your memories."

Sunny sighed.

"Fair enough. As for my immediate goals… I'm not trying to doubt your competence, Saint Cassia, but how are you going to get me inside the castle? The guards, the runic array, the other safeguards the King must have put in place — you don't seem to be too concerned about any of these."

Cassie was climbing several steps ahead from him, just a few meters from the more intact section of the wall. Once they reached it, there would be Ascended warriors patrolling, and if any of them saw Song of the Fallen escorting an intruder into the stronghold of their clan… things would turn ugly.

She was not going to just stride into the heart of Anvil's Domain, was she?

Cassie stopped for a moment, then continued climbing.

"Don't worry about it. I will keep my word."

At the same time, she raised her hands and carefully pulled her blindfold off, tying it around one of her wrists.

A few moments later, they were on top of the wall.

There were enchanted lanterns installed on wooden posts, illuminating the ramparts.

And there, just a few meters in front of them…

Three heavily armored Masters were standing, staring at Cassie and Sunny with vigilant expressions. He could see dangerous flames igniting in their eyes.

One of them placed his hand on the hilt of his sword and asked, his voice a mix of confusion and wariness:

"Saint Cassia? Who…"

'Damn it…'

Sunny did not move.

And in the next moment, the three Knights of Valor underwent an eerie change.

Their eyes suddenly grew unfocused, drifting away from Cassie's delicate figure. The tense expressions on their faces disappeared. They remained motionless for a few moments, then continued on their patrol without ever looking back.

One walked right past the blind seer, brushing against her seawave cloak.

Cassie calmly moved in the opposite direction, leaving the patrol behind.

A moment later, she said over her shoulder:

"Don't worry. They won't remember seeing us."

Sunny hurriedly followed her, quietly impressed…

And more than a little bit disturbed.

'What an insidious power, indeed.'

Chapter-1643: Unseen

Sunny had contemplated the ways Cassie could get him inside the castle. From using a secret passage through the ruins to using her intricate knowledge of runic sorcery to interfere with the defensive array, there were many potential methods for someone as resourceful as her to choose from.

What he had not expected was that she would, indeed, simply stride inside without paying the elite forces of Valor any heed.

Cassie simply walked forward at a mild pace, poised and elegant. Her calm steps were unhurried. She did not try to avoid the light of the enchanted lanterns or hide from the patrolling knights, acting like nothing was the matter.

And yet, despite Sunny's presence, no one paid her any attention or barred her path.

The powerful Ascended guarding the castle shivered slightly when her gaze fell on them, their expressions turning slack for a moment. Then, they stepped aside and silently continued on their way, as if both Cassie and Sunny had somehow turned invisible. Not, not invisible... impossible to focus on or remember.

The memory of seeing the strange pair was completely erased from the minds of the elite warriors of Valor, replaced by a false recollection of nothing notable happening.

It was rather impressive.

And deeply disturbing.

Sunny was walking behind Cassie, so he could not see her eyes. He wasn't sure he wanted to, either.

Looking at her delicate back, he could not help but remember the suffocating despair and cold dread of LO49. The sinister powers of the Transcendent Terror that had consumed the station were eerily similar to what Cassie was now capable of. There were differences, of course, but the resemblance was there as well.

'Ah. I hate mental attacks.'

From the Forgotten Shore to the desolate expanse of Antarctica, these were the kinds of powers he was wary of the most. There had been creatures who left him broken and bleeding, barely clinging to life, but it were the insidious beings who influenced the mind that had given him the deepest scars. Luckily, Sunny's resistance to mental attacks was now incomparably high.

Still, he wondered what Cassie would be capable of if she went all out and fully unleashed her power. Another scene surfaced in his mind… the scene of the battle in the drowned temple of Fallen Grace, where they had fought against the Defiled Sybil and her enthralled guardians.

Back then, he had seen the Echo of Torment fight against the Drowned… of course, Sunny had not known her true identity, yet. There had been a moment when the Echo raised one of the demons above the shallow water and gazed into its eyes — the abomination's body convulsed, an indescribable sound escaped from its mouth, and its lifeless body was tossed aside like a rag doll.

In that short moment… had the Echo burned all of the demon's memories away, turning the Drowned warrior into a mindless shell of a living being?

Speaking of, where was that Echo now?

That was not the most sinister aspect of Cassie's power, either. Having your memory wiped clean was frightening, true... but having it changed without your knowledge was much more terrifying. Could she enthrall people into becoming her marionettes? Turn loyal soldiers into zealous traitors?

Create witnesses to non-existent crimes who sincerely believed in the

truthfulness of their testimonies, so that no telepathic Aspect could disprove them?

The loss of one's identity was somehow more frightening than the loss of one's life.

Her Aspect was simply too insidious.

…In hindsight, perhaps the Knights of Valor were lucky to only have their memories manipulated a little.

'I know that there are limits and conditions to her power, but still... she must have hidden it really well, to not be included in the highest tier of Saints.'

Sunny looked around, studying the ruins of true Bastion. It was hard to say because of how damaged and dilapidated the castle was, but it seemed somewhat different from the illusory version. Currently, they were still on the remains of the outer wall. Below it was an ancient scene of devastation, with a few relatively intact sections of the ruin towering above.

At that moment, Cassie spoke in a calm tone:

"The true castle is hidden in the reflection of its illusory counterpart. If one knows how to look, they might glimpse the truth when looking at the lake. The false Bastion is a relatively safe place now that the Knights of Valor have eradicated most abominations around it. The true Bastion, however, is fraught with peril."

She paused for a moment.

"Whatever you do, do not drink the water from the lake. Do not look at reflections, and if a reflection moves strangely, walk away immediately. Above all else, do not answer if a reflection speaks to you. It will perceive it as an invitation."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

'Good thing I am always wary of mirrors thanks to Mordret.'

"Does it have something to do with that guy?"

Cassie understood who he was talking about without having to hear a name. She shook her head lightly.

"No. It is simply the nature of this place. The creatures in the lake are deadly, and so are those in the forest. However, the things that come from reflections are the most dangerous, because they are too strange and we know too little about them. We call them the Others."

She took a few more steps and continued calmly:

"We must be wary of the Others, but we also must be wary of the King. I can shelter you from the gazes of his servants because their swords are sheathed and slumbering. But if you see a sword that is drawn… hide immediately. You must possess some ability to hide yourself — otherwise, you wouldn't have been able to traverse the lake."

Sunny nodded, prompting Cassie to add:

"You did well to come unarmed. Do not summon a sword of your own while you are here, even if it wasn't forged by Valor. Oh… and take this."

She handed him a smooth pebble without turning around. Sunny took it and noticed a complicated weave of elegant runes carved into its surface. The pebble felt slightly warm to the touch.

Cassie explained:

"This is a token that will allow you to pass most of the defensive enchantments. A counterfeit one… I made it myself. So, don't lose it."

She took a deep breath and then added, a hint of tension finally finding its way into her voice:

"If you do, the two of us will end up being invited to an audience with the King. One that we will remember for the rest of our lives… our short and painful lives, that is."

Sunny smiled darkly, remembering the sight of Anvil facing that Great Titan in Antarctica.

He knew that the two of them would meet eventually. But it was too soon to meet the King of Swords, for now.

"Is he really here?"

Before Cassie could answer, a loud sound rolled across the ruins, disturbing the silence of the night. It was deep and melodious, ringing across the dark lake like thunder.

The sound of a hammer falling on an anvil.

Chapter-1644: Royal Forge

The ringing of steel was still echoing across the desolate ruin when Sunny shifted slightly and looked in the direction where the sound had come from.

There was a tall tower rising into the broken sky some distance away. Its walls were covered by a net of deep cracks, but the crumbling tower still stood straight and proud, much higher than any other structure in the vast ruin. Outlined against the pale radiance of the shattered moon, its dark shape was like a battered sword thrust into the ground by the hand of a celestial giant.

The tower was dark, but at the very top of it, a fiery glow escaped from the arching windows. It was as if a sea of vermilion flame was burning inside.

That was where the ringing sound had come from.

A moment later, another strike resounded, and then another. They rolled across the restless lake, forceful and methodical, filling the night with the sound of clashing metal. Suddenly, Sunny felt as if he was on a battlefield, and his heart started to beat faster.

He froze for a moment, looking at the dark tower with a somber expression.

"What is that?"

Cassie turned to face the tower, as well. She remained silent for a few moments, then said evenly:

"It's the King. He is forging."

Sunny couldn't help but frown.

He had just asked about Anvil's whereabouts, and a moment later, the King of Sword announced his presence. Sunny did not really fear him… but that was not because the steel Sovereign was not worthy of being feared. It was simply because Sunny had developed an unwise tolerance for fear after a decade of being constantly exposed to all kinds of unimaginable horror.

Still, it would be a lie to say that he wasn't apprehensive.

'Spooky bastard.'

He hesitated for a moment, then asked quietly:

"What is he forging?"

Cassie smiled.

"What else? He is forging a sword. The King must have created a million of them already, but he never stops for long. The swords that the Knights of Valor wield are merely some that he discarded… the ones Paladins wield are, as well."

Then the storm of swords Anvil had commanded in Antarctica were all forged by him, then… probably. Sunny could not really imagine how a human being could have created so many of them.

He sighed.

"And here I was thinking myself an accomplished weaponsmith."

Cassie tilted her head a little.

"Oh! Right. You create Memories."

A faint smile appeared on her lips.

"Sorry. With everything else, I almost forgot."

Sunny studied the pebble she had given him. The weave of runes was elegant and intricate. He could not quite decipher it, because the runes did not inscribe a functional enchantment. Instead, they made the pebble a part of a much larger one — without comprehending the

entire array, he wouldn't be able to comprehend the runes carved into the small stone.

It was interesting, though. The pebble must have let the defensive array know that Sunny was allowed into the castle. It was warm to the touch. But where did the essence that nourished the pebble come from? He didn't feel it consuming his own, and there was no nexus inside to store some.

"You are a skilled sorceress yourself, it seems."

Cassie nodded lightly.

"My skill is… sufficient, I guess. I've been taught a little by a man named Noctis, in my Second Nightmare. After that, I learned from the enchanters of Valor and on my own. What about you?"

Sunny lingered for a while, then answered simply:

"I am self-taught."

His only teachers were the Nightmare Spell and necessity. Neither could take credit for his accomplishments.

She made a turn, heading for a more damaged section of the wall, and said:

"I am curious, though. Creating a Memory is not a question of skill. No matter how good I am at runic sorcery, it's not something I can do. The same goes for enchanters of Valor — they are only capable of forging Memories because of the kind of Aspects the members of the main family and its branches tend to awaken, not because of sorcery. So, Sunny… are you, perchance, a bastard son of King Anvil?"

Sunny stared at her silently for a while, making sure that she was serious.

She was.

'Well, I guess it might look that way. A mysterious man who can create Memories, lives in Bastion, and is somehow a Saint on top of it all...'

Sunny barely prevented himself from exploding with laughter. If he hadn't covered his mouth with both hands, sentries all across the wall would have been alerted to their presence.

"Me? Anvil's son? Gods, no… although I must admit, it would have been very funny if there was yet another estranged son of his wandering around the Dream Realm."

He shook his head.

"No... and before you ask, I'm not a son of Madoc, or any other member of their family, either. Do I look like a Legacy to you?"

Cassie was silent for a moment.

"You do not look like anything to me. I'm blind."

Sunny coughed awkwardly, prompting her to smile:

"...And the last time we met, we were alone. So, I could only borrow your sight, which meant staring at myself for the entire conversation. Well, I won't lie. I did steal a peek through the eyes of the knights we've met today. I was curious to see what the famous owner of the Eye C… of the Brilliant Emporium Cafe looks like."

She shrugged.

"Actually, you do look like a Legacy. But maybe it's just because of the confidence that comes with being a Saint."

Sunny shook his head with a crooked smile, not letting her off.

"I'm sure that you observed me carefully, and for a while, before paying a visit to the Brilliant Emporium. And by "observed", I mean "spied on". Thank you for the compliment, in any case."

This time, it was Cassie's turn to cough.

'I'm right on the money.'

He enjoyed her slight embarrassment for a few moments, then said neutrally:

"I don't know much about how enchanters of Valor create Memories, but it is probably due to the War God's lineage. After all, she is also the goddess of progress, technology, and craft. Plus, family members are known to awaken Aspects of a similar nature… perhaps due to sharing a similar upbringing and fate. I assure you, my upbringing was quite different from that of a member of Clan Valor."

Sunny hesitated before adding:

"The way I create Memories is different from theirs."

Cassie tilted her head a little and asked curiously:

"I've been told that the Memories you make are not very potent, but have the benefit of being perfectly suited for their wielder. You must be hiding the true extent of your abilities to avoid attention, though. How good are you, exactly?"

Sunny briefly glanced at Cassie's delicate neck, noticing a thin string hanging around it. Would she be able to remember if he said that the charm she wore had been made Supreme by him? Probably not.

He smiled.

"I doubt that any person in the world can create a better Memory than me."

It wasn't an empty boast. Forgemasters of Valor could create potent Memories, but their craft was the result of unique Aspect Abilities and runic sorcery, which was alien to the concept of Memories. Sunny, meanwhile, was a true weaver. The only master of Weaver's sorcery in existence. Therefore, his abilities were broader and infinitely more flexible.

So, really, there was just one entity better than him at creating Memories. The Nightmare Spell. But he wasn't going to compete with that…

He glanced at Cassie and asked:

"Why? Are you going to order a Memory, after all? Let me tell you, Saint Cassia… I'll give you an exclusive discount. Our service is top-

notch, and we can handle all kinds of orders. Combat Memories, Utility Memories… even cosmetic Memories are not out of the question! Also… I don't usually do this… but just for you, I'll disclose a big secret.

We can even make a custom name and description for your Memory. There's no better memento or one-of-a-kind gift for a loved one…"

Cassie touched her hair nervously, then added in a dubious tone:

"Really? Well… I might indeed commission a custom Memory from you, then…"

Chapter-1645: Found Nothing

Cassie guided Sunny deeper into the ruins. She showed more caution after descending from the outer wall, to his relief — the young woman remained calm and composed, but he noticed that she chose roundabout paths, keeping to the less populated areas of the ancient castle.

From time to time, ghostly runes ignited on the weathered stones as they passed. The pebble Sunny held in his hands grew a little warmer in those moments.

After a while, Cassie spoke again:

"We are staying in the desolate parts of true Bastion to avoid running into someone powerful. I can handle the Knights without too much problem, but if we meet a Saint, especially one from the direct bloodline… a complication might arise."

Sunny nodded, strangely relieved. It was nice to have confirmation that Cassie's power was not limitless, even if she was on his side.

The blind seer lingered for a few moments, then asked:

"You only told me that you needed to get inside the castle. Where, exactly, do you want me to lead you?"

He shrugged.

"As close to the main keep as possible. I'll know where I need to go once I get there."

In fact, Sunny did not know the precise location of what he was looking for. He just knew that there was something hidden here, in Bastion, and that the members of Clan Valor must not have found it yet. Well… maybe they had. But he was willing to bet that they

hadn't.

That was because the timeline did not make sense. The Citadel that the founder of Valor had conquered was the illusory Bastion, not the real one. Otherwise, it would not have been conquered at all — no member of the First Generation had been powerful enough to survive in a Death Zone, after all, let alone claim it.

It was only after Broken Sword, Anvil, Ki Song, and Asterion had become Transcendent that this hidden place was disturbed by humans. Even then, Sunny doubted that Valor had truly occupied the true Bastion before the Sovereigns emerged.

Which meant that they had not had a lot of time to explore the vast ruin, especially considering how dangerous it was, and how few people had access to it. The best warriors of Valor had also spent more than a decade conquering distant regions of the Dream Realm to expand the King's domain.

Perhaps Anvil and his knights had discovered a few of the more easily accessible secrets of the fallen castle, but Sunny doubted that they would have found them all. Or at least he hoped so.

His hope was based on the fact that there was only one person in the world who possessed a daemon's lineage, and that person was him.

So, Sunny cautiously extended his senses outward, communicating with the ancient shadows populating the ruin. He could feel the dark hollows hiding under the rubble. Some of them were simply the result of stone blocks falling on each other, some were halls and chambers that had been buried and forgotten in the devastation.

However, none of them were what he was looking for.

Cassie led him deeper into the ruin, choosing the most deserted paths. Neither of them needed a source of light to walk, so their passage was quiet and unseen, illuminated only by the pale radiance of the shattered moon. They walked across crumbling parapets and half-buried pathways, the ancient stones hanging dangerously above their heads.

Anvil's hammer continued to ring, steady and powerful, like the beating of an emotionless steel heart.

Sunny glanced at Cassie and said in a neutral tone:

"It must be... a real chore to sleep here."

She seemed surprised.

"Who would be insane enough to sleep in a place like this?"

Then, the young woman hesitated for a few moments and added with a sigh:

"It is forbidden, actually. This land used to belong to the Demon of Imagination. Here, what you dream about might very well become reality… the last time a knight dozed off on the wall, we lost four Masters to his nightmare."

Sunny fell silent with an appalled expression on his face. That was a little bit too much.

'A Death Zone is a Death Zone, I guess.'

If Nightmare wasn't busy performing an important task in Godgrave, he would have summoned him immediately.

As they drew closer to the inner area of the ruined castle, Sunny sent his shadow sense down, into the mass of the drowned mountain below. He was cautious, limiting its reach to a narrow… beam, of sorts. Something like that had not been possible before, but after becoming a Saint, he learned how to control his senses better.

The mass of stone beneath his feet seemed solid enough. Sunny followed Cassie while concentrating on the ancient ruins — he even closed his eyes to feel the surroundings better.

However… he felt nothing.

The longer they spent among the ruins, the less of anything he felt.

'I'm sure there is something.'

If it had been before, Sunny would have probably been drawn to a fateful location by his intuition, or simply stumbled upon it due to being Fated. But now, he was the opposite of that, and his intuition remained silent.

Cassie did not show it, but she must have grown uneasy about their aimless wandering by now. Indeed, he would seem like a complete lunatic if his search did not produce a result. Who infiltrates the secret stronghold of a Sovereign… for nothing?

Nothing, nothing…

Sunny smiled.

'Found it.'

There was absolutely nothing below them. But that was exactly what gave away the hidden sanctum — even if the mountain was made from solid stone, there would be cracks and crevasses inside it. And those would be populated by ancient shadows. With how potent Sunny's shadow sense was, he would have felt their presence.

But he felt nothing, which meant that something was blocking his senses.

Deep, deep below…

Sunny opened his eyes and took a deep breath. Noticing that he had stopped, Cassie halted and turned to face him.

Her eyes were blue and clear, devoid of any abnormality. He still chose to look away.

"What is the matter?"

Sunny smiled subtly and shrugged.

"I found what I was looking for."

She tilted her head a little.

"...What now, then?"

He hesitated for a bit, then sighed.

"Now… please excuse me for a moment, Saint Cassia."

Taking a step forward, he placed his hands on her delicate shoulders.

And then, he pulled her into the shadows, teleporting both of them into the depth of the mountain.

Chapter-1646: Dungeons & Daemons

A moment later, the two of them were far below ground, with countless tons of stone hanging above their heads. If Sunny was not mistaken, the hidden sanctum he had found was most of the way to the bottom of the lake, at the very heart of the mountains.

In the past, Sunny had not been able to carry living beings with him when stepping through the shadows — with the sole exception of Nephis. It was different now that he was a Saint, though. He could pull much heavier inanimate objects with him, as well as actual people. The latter were very cumbersome, though, consuming a lot of his essence.

Especially those whose souls were vast and powerful. Teleporting Cassie with him, and to such a remote place, had drained a good portion of his reserves.

Sunny sighed inwardly and tried to take a deep breath.

There was nothing to inhale, though.

A strangely calm voice resounded in his head, startling him:

[There is no air here.]

It was Cassie's voice.

But why was she so calm?

Sunny glanced at the blind seer with a hint of confusion, then shrugged and summoned the Quintessence Pearl. A few seconds later, a beautiful white pearl appeared in his hand. This time, Sunny did not place it in his mouth, keeping it between himself and Cassie.

Soon, the two of them were able to breathe again.

"Please stay close, Saint Cassia."

Saints could keep their breath for much longer than mundane people, so neither of them had felt any discomfort in these few moments. Still, he had expected that Cassie would be at least a little startled.

But then again… why would she be? Cassie did not receive visions of the future anymore, but her Awakened Ability was functioning perfectly fine. She must have known that Sunny would use Shadow Step a few seconds before he had, and saw him summoning the Quintessence Pearl before he ever did.

Cassie usually acted in a way that made people forget about this Ability of hers, but if one stopped to think about it, she had every conversation and witnessed every event twice. For as long as her Awakened Ability was active, it was all but impossible to surprise her. And she would have definitely kept it active while sneaking a suspicious Saint into a Sovereign's stronghold.

Her Ascended Ability, meanwhile, seemed to have undergone a change. Unless she was using a Memory to communicate with him telepathically, it was that Ability of hers that allowed her to talk to people she had marked.

Sunny was well-acquainted with this manner of conversation thanks to the Shroud of Dusk, so he wasn't worried about thinking an unwanted thought aloud.

'Huh. Convenient.'

No wonder Nephis had seemed so well-informed about his Shadows when they met in the Nameless Temple.

Cassie, meanwhile, looked like she was having similar thoughts. Facing Sunny, she tilted her head a little and asked:

"A spatial movement Ability?"

He nodded.

"Well, yes. Something like that."

She contemplated for a few moments, then said casually:

"Huh. Convenient."

Sunny blinked.

With that out of the way, he could finally look around — his shadow sense was rendered useless, so he could only rely on his sight now.

The space where the two of them had found themselves was not very large, and submerged in total darkness. Luckily, it was a mundane kind of darkness, which did not pose an obstacle for him.

They were in a small chamber. It was clearly artificial, as opposed to naturally formed. The walls were smooth and polished, with no seams on their stone surface. The ceiling was high. There was nothing in the stone chamber — no furniture, no spiderwebs, no runic circles carved into the floor. There was only a tall door, which seemed to have been carved from a single piece of dark wood.

Nevertheless, Sunny felt the same kind of discomfort he had felt once in the Ebony Tower when looking at it. The door seemed quite mundane, but it was also ever so slightly wrong. The handle was placed a bit too high, its shape was a bit off, the hinges were spaced strangely. It was as though it had been made for a being that resembled a human, but was not quite human.

A daemon, perhaps.

Cassie remained motionless, but he knew that she was studying the stone chamber through his eyes. A few moments later, she spoke:

"I know that it might be strange to only ask now. But, Sunny… what exactly are you trying to find here? And where is here, exactly?"

He smiled subtly.

"We are far below the castle, at the heart of the mountain. In a place that the Demon of Imagination must have left behind. As for what I am searching for, it's simple…"

He took a careful step toward the door.

"It's power."

Cassie seemed surprised.

"Power?"

Sunny nodded.

"Haven't you heard, Saint Cassia? Knowledge is the origin of power. At least that was what the Demon of Fate thought, and I'm inclined to agree. Ah… but it is also the heaviest thing in the world. So not everyone is strong enough to hold it."

She turned her head sharply, but Sunny simply continued in a carefree tone:

"So, what I am trying to find here is lost knowledge… and, if I am lucky, something just as forbidden."

With that, Sunny grabbed the handle, turned it, and pushed the door open. Or, at least, he tried to.

The door didn't budge.

Scowling slightly, Sunny put more strength into it. He had a lot of strength as a Transcendent Terror — and yet, the door didn't move.

'Is it locked? But there is no lock. Have the hinges rusted through? No, wait…'

"You should try pulling."

Sunny coughed awkwardly, then pulled instead of pushing.

The door opened easily, and the hinges produced no noise.

"...I was just going to. Yeah."

Cassie did not say anything and walked over, stopping just behind him. Sunny tensed slightly.

'Why is she standing so close? Oh, right… I told her to, because of the Quintessence Pearl…'

"So, what kind of knowledge do you hope to find?"

He walked out of the stone chamber and stopped, studying the long corridor beyond.

"Oh, you know… nothing too unexpected. Why did the Doom War start? How did it end? Who won? How did the gods die? How did the daemons die?

Where are their corpses?"

Sunny took a deep breath and added nonchalantly:

"Why was the Nightmare Spell created? What is its purpose? What happened to its creator? Simple stuff like that…"

Of course, there was another goal Sunny was pursuing, and another thing he wanted to find.

The remaining parts of Weaver's forbidden lineage… he wanted them. He wasn't satisfied with only having an incomplete collection of fragments.

Not anymore, at least.

Chapter-1647: Infinity Mirror

'Now, this… is going to be a problem.'

Standing on the threshold, Sunny studied the long corridor. It stretched in both directions as far as he could see, bending slightly. The stone floor was smooth and even, while the tall ceiling was illuminated by a scattering of softly glowing gemstones. The turquoise gems were embedded into it, dimly drowning the corridor in pale light.

The problem was with the walls.

Both of them were perfectly smooth and seamless, as if the corridor had been formed inside the mountain by some unknown means instead of being constructed. Much worse, their glossy surface was reflective… the walls of the corridor were like two endless mirrors.

Remembering what Cassie had said, Sunny frowned.

The blind seer inhaled deeply behind him.

"Oh, my."

Her voice was somber.

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then asked neutrally:

"Left or right?"

Cassie answered with a hint of confusion:

"Why are you asking me?"

He scratched the back of his head and shrugged.

"Why not? My luck is pretty much non-existent. So, I'll trust your

intuition."

She tilted her head a little.

"Really? Because my intuition tells me to get out of here as soon as possible."

'Yeah, I should have expected that answer...'

Sunny closed his eyes for a second, then cleared his throat.

"...On second thought, why don't we just go left?"

The moment the two of them stepped into the corridor, their reflections appeared on the polished walls. Since the two endless mirrors were positioned directly opposite each other, the reflections stretched into infinity, forming countless mirrored corridors. When Sunny took a step, a legion of his reflections took a step. When Cassie followed, a legion of her reflections followed, too.

They were surrounded by a myriad of identical copies of themselves, marching in step with them on both sides.

Suddenly, he felt very uneasy.

"...You said not to answer if a reflection speaks to me, right?"

Cassie nodded, and a myriad of her reflections nodded at him at the same time.

Sunny's reflections were pale and somber. Cassie's reflections were beautiful and moved with elegant grace.

"It's better not to look at them at all. See no evil… and all that."

He grimaced.

'And my shadow sense just happens to be gone. What a convenient coincidence.'

Frowning, he lowered his head and looked at the floor. As Sunny walked forward, he concentrated on his feet. Nevertheless, he could

still glimpse the reflections at the periphery of his vision, all walking forward while looking down.

Only… did he imagine it, or was one of the countless reflections completely still and staring directly at him, instead?

Sunny had to use all of his willpower to keep looking down instead of turning to confirm it. A moment later, there was nothing out of the ordinary in his peripheral vision once again.

[How powerful are these Others, exactly?]

He spoke in his mind instead of aloud, believing that Cassie would hear him. Indeed, her response came a few moments later:

[Nobody knows. From the reports I've seen, they are sometimes as powerful as the person they reflect. Sometimes, they are strangely brittle… but don't rely on my information too much. It's misleading. Because reports are only left by those who survived. As for those who didn't, there is no way to tell what they faced.]

Sunny frowned.

Cassie lingered for a bit, then added:

[What makes them so dangerous is not their power, but rather their strangeness. We don't know what they are, where they come from, what motivates them, how they think… or if they think at all. When you fight a human or a Nightmare Creature, you can usually predict what will happen, even if only in broad strokes. Because you know what drives your enemy. It's different with the Others.]

He nodded quietly.

What people feared the most was the unknown. And what was not known posed the most danger.

[But if the reflections do come to life, we should be fine as long as we don't look to them and don't speak to them. Right?]

Cassie remained silent longer this time.

[I don't know.]

Sunny grimaced.

All around him, a myriad of reflections grimaced as well.

'How long is this damned corridor?'

They had been walking for a while already. However, there was no sign of other doors, and no end in sight. The mirror tunnel was empty and silent, the dark, dim light of turquoise gemstones washing it in ghostly light.

The only sound that broke the silence was the soft rustle of Cassie's clothes. Sunny's steps, meanwhile, were completely noiseless

But then…

Another sound broke the silence, making him stop in his tracks.

It was the quiet, but unmistakable sound of a glass surface cracking.

Sunny froze for a moment.

'...To hell with this!'

Turning around, he grabbed Cassie and immediately used Shadow Step to teleport back in the direction they had come. Without shadow sense, he could only jump as far as he could see — after a swift series of consecutive jumps, Sunny returned them to the small stone chamber and shut the door, then slumped tiredly on the floor.

"Damn. I hate mirrors so much…"

Come to think of it, there had to be some connection between the reason he tended to avoid mirrors and this place. Mordret must have visited Bastion before being handed to Asterion… had he perhaps encountered something strange here? Or maybe his mother?

Cassie quietly straightened her clothes and sat down, as well. Neither of them were physically tired, but being on edge for extended periods of time inevitably led to mental fatigue.

She was silent for a while, then asked:

"So, what now, Sunny? Are we turning back?"

He glanced at her darkly and remained motionless for a moment.

Then, he shook his head.

"No."

With that, Sunny raised his free hand and summoned another Memory.

A few moments later, a small lantern carved out of black stone appeared on his palm. Cassie turned her head and concentrated on it, a slight frown appearing on her face.

"A lantern?"

He nodded.

"Indeed. However, it is a very special one. This lantern does not produce light. Instead, it swallows it."

What was a reflection? It was light that had been cast back. Therefore, much like shadows, reflections could not exist without light.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny stood up and opened the door of the stone chamber again. At the same time, he opened the gate of the Shadow Lantern.

A moment later, a torrent of shadows surged into the mirror corridor, flooding it with impenetrable darkness.

Chapter-1648: Lost in Reflection

A torrent of shadows flowed into the corridor, submerging it in total darkness. The light of the glowing gemstones was swallowed and disappeared without trace, turning them bleak and lifeless.

Sunny had summoned a swarm of vast and ancient shadows to do the job. These old shadows were unfathomable — it would have taken an equally potent source of light to dispel them. The gemstones had been created from the mind of the Demon of Imagination, true… perhaps they would have chased away the darkness if the shadows were alone.

But they were in the presence of their Lord, and that alone made them much more tyrannical.

A few moments later, a long stretch of the corridor had turned completely lightless. The infinity mirror of its walls was now dull and empty. Nothing reflected on their dim surface, and no reflection haunted the hidden sanctum.

Sunny let out a quiet sigh.

'Who knew that I would use this trick today?'

What he had done was not pure improvisation. Instead, it was one of the methods he had contemplated when thinking about how to deal with Mordret.

Cassie seemed impressed.

"These shadows… obey you?"

Sunny shrugged.

"If I treat them nicely."

Wild shadows were like that. Most were devoted to Sunny, but some were obstinate and willful. The former would obey him out of affection or reverence, but the latter needed to be coaxed and enticed.

"Let's go."

The two of them returned to the corridor. It seemed much smaller without the countless reflections stretching endlessly into the ghostly distance. Claustrophobic, even — still, Sunny felt much more at ease now than he had before.

Cassie suddenly spoke, drawing his attention:

"Are we going left again?"

Sunny smiled.

'That is a good question.'

"No… let's try right this time."

They turned right and started walking at a measured pace. The shadows moved with them, keeping the corridor dark both ahead and behind. Just like that, Sunny and Cassie advanced forward for a while.

Then, they encountered an intersection. A similar corridor crossed the one they had been traversing, and so, Sunny had another choice to make.

He frowned slightly and decided to turn right again. The second corridor had a slight bend to it, as well, so it was impossible to see far ahead… some time later, there was another intersection.

And then another, and another.

Some intersections formed four paths, some only three… there were even bizarre ones that had six, seven, or eight turns. There were dead ends, as well, and corridors that led to one of the crossroads Sunny and Cassie had already passed. The corridors themselves weren't straight, either, bending and twisting at unexpected angles.

It was a mirror labyrinth.

After a while, Sunny sighed and stopped, covering his face with a palm.

In front of them was an open door leading to a small stone chamber. The same chamber they had left behind.

"Have you noticed it?"

Cassie's voice was calm.

He lingered for a while, then nodded.

"Yeah. Damn it."

Sunny had been counting his steps this whole time. It was hard to keep track because of how convoluted the maze of mirrors was, but he was certain of it — they had walked more in each direction than the width of the mountain was.

Which meant that the labyrinth was not beholden to the size of the mountain. It could be endless, for all Sunny knew.

Shaking his head, he leaned on the wall and summoned the Endless Spring. Drinking deeply from the beautiful glass bottle, he then handed it to Cassie.

The young woman took the Memory and frowned for a moment. Then, forgetting the meaning that it held, she brought it to her lips and then returned it to Sunny.

"We can try again."

He hesitated for a bit, then slowly shook his head.

"No. We've been here for too long already. There is still some time before sunrise, but I won't be able to solve this maze quickly. This… is going to be a long project."

Cassie raised an eyebrow.

"We have only agreed that I will bring you inside the castle once."

Sunny smiled.

"Yes. And I have only promised to show you one of my memories. Surely, you want to see more… and I want to explore this place more. It works out perfectly, does it not? We can meet once a month, during the full moon. This way, both of us will slowly gain the knowledge we desire."

She hesitated.

"...I don't know how long I'll remain in Bastion, though. Maybe there is something else you want?"

His smile turned a little darker.

"There are many things I want, Saint Cassia. But this is the deal I am offering."

Cassie frowned, remained silent for a few moments, then nodded.

"Fine. I will guide you inside the castle once again, next month. In exchange for another memory."

Sunny dismissed the Endless Spring and suppressed a chuckle.

'Why did she put on a show if we both knew that she would agree?'

"It's a date, then."

He froze for a moment, then added hurriedly:

"No, wait. It's not a date. I misspoke. It's a… well… an arrangement. You know what I mean."

Cassie observed him with a hint of amusement, then shrugged.

"As you wish. Now… I think it's time for me to receive my payment."

Sunny sighed. He had not been looking forward to this part…

"Fine. We have a bit of time left, so let's do it here."

As long as he returned to the lake before sunrise, there was no safer place in Bastion than this labyrinth. Here, they were hidden from the King's gaze, and no one would disturb them.

'I still hate it.'

Sunny led Cassie into the stone chamber, called the shadows back into the lantern, and closed the door.

Then, he sat on the floor, cross-legged. Cassie sat down in front of him and calmly looked him in the eyes, her back perfectly straight.

"One memory. Of your choosing."

Sunny nodded slowly.

She took a deep breath.

"Then think about what you want me to see."

He did.

The bitter cold. The dim twilight. The cracking of ice as he broke through it and climbed onto the desolate shore… the dark storm of seething emotions raging in his hollow heart…

Cassie's beautiful blue eyes suddenly glistened, pulling him into their depths, changing…

And in the next moment, Sunny gasped.

Chapter-1649: Memory of Ice

A cold ocean washed the shore of a desolate land, its waves frozen and unmoving. The empty sky seemed dim and uncaring, the sun hidden behind a somber veil. The land itself was silent and forlorn, its lifeless expanse buried in snow.

Not far from the shore, the layer of ice shackling of the ocean suddenly fractured and exploded, revealing the restless surface of the dark water. A pale hand rose above the edge and dug into the ice with crushing force. A moment later, a gaunt young man climbed from the cold water, stepping on the frozen waves with a chilling expression on his sunken, alabaster face.

His appearance was both tantalizing and frightening. The young man only wore the tattered remains of a military bodysuit, which was mostly gone. His fair skin was as white as snow, marred by countless gruesome, but eerily bloodless wounds. His eyes, on the contrary, were as dark as the depths of a lightless abyss. The black silk of his wet hair moved slightly in the frigid wind.

He looked like the wretched corpse of a drowned deity that had crawled out of a frozen hell.

His slender torso was mostly bare, revealing an intricate tattoo of a coiling serpent that covered most of his arms, chest, and back. The dark serpent was so lifelike that it almost seemed like its onyx scales were moving under the young man's skin.

Sunny remained motionless for a while, looking at the desolate landscape in front of him. Then, he took a step forward.

Finally, after so much time had passed, he was back at the Antarctic Center.

He had returned to Falcon Scott.

When he took the second step, his gruesomely torn skin was already healing. When he took the third, the intricate plates of a battered onyx armor covered his mangled body, shielding it from the cold and wind.

'It looks the same.'

After the Third Nightmare, when all was said and done, Sunny had returned to the Northern Quadrant among the refugees. He spent some time there, taking care of unfinished business — not that there was a lot for him to do after being erased from the world. Meeting Rain was the very last thing he did. Then, untethered from everything and everyone, he set his sights back on Antarctica.

Crossing the ocean alone had not been easy. Turning into the Onyx Serpent, Sunny dove into the lightless depths, where the darkness nurtured his soul and was rich in spirit essence. Sadly, even empowered by Soul Weave, he could not maintain such an enormous Shell constantly.

But, luckily, there was no shortage of unimaginable horrors populating the oceans of the waking world.

Sunny used the [Serpentine Steel] Ability of the Soul Serpent to augment his fangs, and fought the harrowing depth dwellers to replenish his essence through its [Soul Reaver] Ability, which allowed Serpent to absorb and transfer a portion of soul essence of all beings slain by it in the Soul Weapon or the Soul Beast forms.

Staying in the Shell for such a long time was potentially dangerous now that Sunny did not possess a True Name, but the Onyx Serpent form was one of the few that he could assume without the risk of losing himself — perhaps it was because he knew it so well, or perhaps it was because he shared a kinship with serpentine creatures as an inheritor of Shadow God.

It had taken Sunny weeks to reach Antarctica. And those weeks… had been a cold and dreadful nightmare. Out there in the dark depths of the ocean, he had faced horrors so hideous and dire that no words were enough to describe them. He killed some, and escaped from others. His body had been torn and broken, but in the end, he

survived.

The very idea of crossing the ocean alone had seemed preposterous before, but now that Sunny was a Transcendent Terror, he somehow made it a reality.

The cold darkness currently reigning over his soul was much more terrible than the ocean, anyway. Now that Sunny had left everything behind… his mental state was far from ideal. The pain and anguish had turned into dark anger, and the anger was seething and boiling, refusing to be contained or controlled.

In this world, there was no place for Sunny anymore, and nothing left for him to do.

Except to pay his debts.

And the first score he needed to settle was with the Winter Beast.

…Walking across the frozen waves, Sunny reached the shore of the Antarctic Center and looked around without expression. His eyes were like two pools of darkness, full of cold, ruthless killing intent and murderous resentment.

Some distance away, the port fortress of Falcon Scott lay in ruins, half-buried in snow. The city itself was frozen above it, standing silently on the tall cliffs. The buildings were encased in ice, and so were the remains of the millions of people that had been killed by the Winter Beast just before the end of the long, dreadful night.

Sunny stared at the cliffs for some time, then turned his gaze away. He wasn't quite ready to enter the city yet.

He spent several hours roaming the shore aimlessly, as if looking for something. The frigid cold was absolutely lethal, but Sunny paid it no attention. His shadow sense spread far and wide, enveloping a vast area of the desolate land.

'Where is it… where is it…'

In the end, he stopped and stared at the ground silently. Finally, there was a hint of emotion on his face. Sunny raised a trembling

hand and covered his eyes, a brittle smile twisting his lips.

He couldn't find it. The grave where he had buried his soldiers… he had not been quite in right mind back then, and the terrain had been changed a lot by the snow and ice. So, he simply did not know where the resting place of Belle, Dorn, and Samara was anymore.

"Ah… damn it…"

A stifled sound escaped from his mouth, and then, Sunny angrily struck the rusted remains of a broken MWP that lay nearby, covered with snow.

There was a thunderous boom, and the massive machine exploded. Jagged pieces of alloy shot into the distance like deadly shrapnel, while its torso was sent flying. It collided against the cliffs a hundred or so meters away, causing an entire section of the cliffside to fracture and collapse in an avalanche of shattered rocks.

Unfazed, Sunny raised his head to the sky and let out a distorted scream, then looked down, his eyes boiling with dark fury.

"Kill it… I will rip that thing apart…"

Gritting his teeth, he breathed in the cold air of Antarctica and headed for the ruins of the city.

Chapter-1650: Frozen City

Sunny did not know what he expected to see in Falcon Scott. He didn't even know why he felt compelled to enter it… and yet, he did enter it, walking along the silent streets with a distant expression on his pale face. He came here precisely because he didn't want to, reluctant to see the monument to his failure.

He owed to himself, and to those people whom he had failed to protect, to witness their final resting place in all its horrid glory.

Perhaps it was simply because now that no one remembered him, Sunny wanted to at least remember himself. Even the things he would have wanted to forget.

The city was pretty much exactly like he had imagined.

It was a frozen graveyard. The fatal cold of the Winter Beast's blizzard had killed everyone in what seemed like mere moments. The corpses were hidden inside the buildings or buried under snow, so the city seemed utterly empty.

They had not suffered, at least…

Some buildings had collapsed in the past months under the weight of the ice. Others stood like colossal gravestones… or frigid mausoleums, maybe, for those who had perished inside. Strangely enough, no Nightmare Creatures seemed to have entered the city to feast on the corpses. It was as though the Winter Beast had marked this place as its territory.

Sunny passed a few familiar structures… the barracks where the Irregulars had been stationed, the government compound, the dormitory tower where Beth and Professor Obel had lived. His mind was flooded with memories, which only made his mental state deteriorate further.

It was a strange thing, to be alone.

Now that Sunny was alone, erased from existence, he felt no compulsion to control his emotions or maintain the illusion of normalcy. There was no one to witness him fall apart, anyway, and nobody to get the wrong impression of him. There were no tethers connecting him to the world, yes… but, as it turned out, those same tethers had been like supports that held his mind together.

He must have looked quite disturbing from the side.

Only now that Sunny was truly and utterly alone did he realize how much of his habits and behavior had been dictated by the need to blend in with his environment… with human society. Now, he didn't have to bother with maintaining acceptable expressions, keeping improper feelings from his gaze, and saying the right words.

Or saying anything at all, really.

'Maybe I should do all these things, anyway.'

He suspected that giving in to this utter freedom would make him slip into some sort of derangement eventually, but couldn't bother to care.

Finally, he reached the crumbled remains of the city wall and spent some time gazing at the snowy field beyond.

Climbing over the wreckage, Sunny jumped down, turned his body light enough to walk on the snow, and left the ghost of Falcon Scott behind.

This was probably the last time he would ever see it. But that... was fine.

It was for the best, really.

Some time later, he reached the place where the last soldiers of the First Evacuation Army had died, killed by the deathly cold of the unnatural snowstorm. Their frozen figures were still there, those closest laying on the ground, those who had endured longer frozen like ice sculptures.

His motionless face seemed frozen, too.

He spent a while among them, looking at the horizon. The Winter Beast had retreated into the heart of the landmass, but the signs of its passage remained. Today, Antarctica looked much more like it had once, frigid and encased in ice. It was darkly fitting.

Sunny was still consumed by his thoughts when something moved under the snow, and a hideous creature lunged at him from below. He did not move, but shadows around him stirred and shot forward with incredible speed, catching the abomination in the air.

A moment later, it was gruesomely torn apart, a rain of hot blood falling on Sunny like crimson dew.

His expression didn't change, but his eyes gleamed darkly.

'Strange.'

It was still strange, to kill a Nightmare Creature and not hear the familiar voice of the Spell announce its Rank, Class, and name.

The snow all around him moved and exploded, dozens of grotesque bodies rushing to rip him to shreds. There was a whole swarm of abominations here… Sunny finally moved, a sinister smile contorting his face.

He was so fast that it almost seemed as if he simply disappeared in one place and appeared in the other. There was no weapon in his hand, and no need for one, either. The gauntlets of the Onyx Mantle were more than enough.

Falling into the savage battle style of the Barrow Wraiths, Sunny crushed the skull of one of the abominations with his bare fist. A split second later, he was near another, piercing its chest with his hand and crushing its heart. In a blink of an eye, he was already somewhere else, brutally tearing a monster's jaws apart.

Sunny fought ruthlessly and methodically, destroying the Nightmare Creatures in the most swift and brutal fashion… no, it couldn't even be called a fight. He wasn't a fighter right now — he was a butcher, or a ruthless executioner at best.

It took him no more than twelve seconds to obliterate the entire swarm. By the time he was done, the blood covering his onyx armor had already turned to ice.

The Nightmare Creatures were dead… but not all of them.

He had left one alive.

Now, the massive beast was writhing on the snow, struggling to burrow into it as shadows held it in place. There was no escape from Sunny, but the abomination was still desperately trying to run away.

Turning his head, Sunny studied the ugly creature and then took a step toward it.

"Where are you going? Who allowed you to leave?"

Approaching the abomination, he crouched beside it and stared into its frenzied eyes with a smile.

The creature's terrifying maw was less than a meter away from his face, but Sunny didn't care.

"You chose a wrong day to exist, wretch. Ah, but it's for the best. It's exactly what I need!"

He outstretched one hand, sensing the Soul Serpent slither forth. Soon, a torrent of darkness flowed from his fingers onto the snow, forming into a massive Shadow.

That Shadow was not a great serpent, however. Instead, it took the form of a towering creature that had two stumpy legs, an emaciated, hunched torso and disproportionately long, multi-jointed hands — two of them, each ending with a set of horrifying bone claws, and another two, these ones shorter, ending with almost human-like fingers.

Its body was covered in ragged inky-black fur, and there were five glossy black eyes on its head. Beneath them, a terrible maw crowding with razor-sharp teeth was half-open, as though in anticipation. Viscous drool was running down the creature's chin and dripping into the snow.

The most unnerving part, though, were the strange shapes endlessly moving, worm-like, under the creature's skin.

It was the Mountain King. Or rather, a version of the Mountain King that looked as if it had been dipped into a pool of liquid darkness.

Sunny's cold smile widened a little, his dark eyes gleaming with sinister will.

"Go on. This one will be the first."

Serpent took a heavy step forward and grabbed the struggling abomination with its powerful hand. Then, one of the worm-like larvae moving under his skin crawled from under his claws and burrowed into the monster's flesh.

The Nightmare Creature froze for a moment, and then let out a chilling wail.

A moment later, its body contorted in a terrible convulsion.

Sunny grinned darkly.

"...But not the last. No, not at all."

Chapter-1651: New Predator

The [Formless] Ability allowed Serpent to assume the form of any shadow resting in Sunny's soul, inheriting its powers and abilities. The shadow had to be of the same or lower Rank and Class, which meant that the most powerful form Serpent could currently assume was that of the Sybil of the Fallen Grace… the Terror of LO49.

And, in fact, that form was suited for Sunny's goal much better than the Mountain King. However, Serpent had to maintain the transformation with its own essence, and could not sustain such a powerful shape for a long time, let alone constantly.

Once the Shadow's essence was exhausted, the effects of those powers it had assumed would be gone. In other words, if Sunny had ordered Serpent to turn into the harrowing Sybil and enthrall a swarm of Nightmare Creatures, those abominations would have been released from the mind hex before too long.

The Mountain King, meanwile, was merely an Awakened Tyrant. As a Transcendent Terror, Serpent could maintain that form almost indefinitely, especially after Sunny augmented it with the shadows. That was exactly what he needed in order to collect a small army of abominable thralls.

It was funny… the Larvae the Mountain King spawned were Dormant Beasts. Therefore, his first thrall was also a Dormant Beast — but one wearing a Fallen Monster's corpse. What exactly did it make him, Sunny did not know. Nor did he care that much.

'Come to think of it…'

Sunny glanced at the towering figure of the Soul Serpent, then at the hideous creature laying obediently on the snow. He sighed.

By now, Serpent had to possess at least two new Abilities — since it

had risen in Class twice while following Rain, and in Rank once. But without the Spell conveniently informing Sunny about what these Abilities did, he had no way of knowing what they were.

There had not been a lot of time for research and experimentation, either, while he was traversing the toxic wilderness of the Northern Quadrant and fighting his way through the depths of the ocean.

All he had was a suspicion that one of these Abilities had to do with Serpent's weapon form, while the other one had to do with souls and spirit essence. However, he wasn't sure.

'Well. I'll find out later.'

Once the Winter Beast was dead, there would be no serious threats left in the Antarctic Center for a while… at least until the powerful abominations in East Antarctica sensed its absence and crossed the half-frozen strait.

'One more reason to kill that cursed thing.'

Not that Sunny needed more reasons.

Looking at the Larva with contempt, he remained motionless for a few moments, and then turned away. The desolate landscape of the Antarctic Center stretched in front of him, tall mountains rising from the snowy plain in the distance.

The chilling darkness in Sunny's eyes stirred.

"Time to hunt..."

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There had been three most powerful Nightmare Creatures in the Antarctic Center during the Chain of Nightmares — the Fallen Titan Goliath, the Corrupted Terror Sybil of the Fallen Grace, and the Corrupted Titan Winter Beast. Sunny had killed the first two, while the last now ruled this land.

Which was to say that Sunny, now a Transcendent Terror, was the second most terrifying creature in the frigid mountains of the

abandoned landmass.

He remembered vividly the dreadful gauntlet of the Southern Campaign. Back then, the Antarctic Center was like a merciless death trap, with harrowing abominations waiting to ambush him and his soldiers on every turn. He had crossed it once with the First Evacuation Army, and the second time with a convoy of refugees, each time struggling desperately just to survive.

But things were different now.

Now, Sunny was the harrowing predator, while the abominations dwelling in the mountains were his prey.

He slowly moved south, retracing the steps of the army. It was already winter in Antarctica, but the sun had not fallen beyond the horizon yet… there was twilight and darkness dwelling in the deep canyons between the snowy peaks, so he could remain unseen, moving from shadow to shadow like a stalking beast.

Wherever Sunny passed, the snow was painted crimson with blood. The corpses of the Nightmare Creatures were brutally torn apart, and their carcasses littered the slopes like morbid gardens of mangled flesh. He appeared out of nowhere, surrounded by a tide of shadows, and butchered the abominations with cold, ruthless determination.

He even started to enjoy the slaughter after a while.

...Not all of them died, of course.

From time to time, he chose a Nightmare Creature to be infected with a Mountain King's Larva. Slowly but surely, his swarm of thralls grew, which made it harder to hide them. Eventually, he had to abandon stealth and advance forward openly. Sunny hoped that a horde of Nightmare Creatures would attack him, but sadly, the number of abominations seemed to have dwindled under the Winter Beast's reign.

The great hordes of Nightmare Creatures were nowhere to be seen. Some must have migrated south, some had succumbed to cold, and some could have even crossed the strait to East Antarctica. Only the

strongest and most resilient abominations remained... and these were the abominations Sunny hunted.

There were creatures of all kinds following him now. He did not choose the most powerful monstrosities or the most lethal to enthrall, so their combat power was not that impressive. What he pursued was variety… variety of types, shapes, forms, elemental affinities, and resistances.

These thralls were not meant to kill the Winter Beast, after all. They were only meant to help Sunny find a way to kill the creature himself.

The further inland he went, the colder it became. There were less Nightmare Creatures around, too, since fewer and fewer of them could withstand the dreadful cold. Even Sunny himself was starting to feel uncomfortable, hiding from the cutting wind and wearing Ananke's Mantle to warm himself.

By the time he reached the ruins of Erebus Field, the cold was almost lethal.

Here in the vicinity of Mount Erebus, though, Sunny could at least breathe easily. The siege capital that had once stood at the foot of the volcano was destroyed by Goliath. The ruins were mostly drowned in lava — the lava had long turned to stone, of course, which was now buried by snow.

Still, the heat coming from below the ground made this area a little bit warmer.

Standing on a cliff above the snowy plain, Sunny took a deep breath and studied it carefully.

'...It will do.'

There was no better battlefield in the Antarctic Center if he wanted to kill the Winter Beast.

Chapter-1652: Terrible Challenger

Two weeks after Sunny had returned to Antarctica, he stood on a cliff overseeing a vast scene of devastation. In front of him, a great valley was formed from collapsed mountains and stone debris, the ruinous landscape now covered in ice and snow.

This was the place where Sky Tide, Wake of Ruin, and Dire Fang had battled the three emerged Titans — Whispering Legion, Goliath, and Winter Beast. The Whispering Legion had been slain, while the other two calamitous abominations drove the Saints away. An entire span of the mountain range had been demolished in the process.

There were Nightmare Gates hidden under the crushed stone, without a doubt, or maybe above it.

Sunny could not see, because most of the valley was hidden by a raging blizzard. This blizzard was the very same that had once enveloped Falcon Scott, sapping the lives of all its remaining inhabitants.

It was the manifestation of the Winter Beast's authority.

The air was so cold that each breath Sunny took felt like he was swallowing a scattering of sharp knives.

Not paying it any attention, he was gazing down with an expressionless face, his eyes drowning in deep darkness. His gaunt body was encased in fearsome onyx armor, and that armor was shrouded in darkness.

Out there in the valley, far below, a long line of Nightmare Creatures was advancing into the blizzard. Their movements were still and unnatural, as if they were corpses animated by some unknown force.

But, at the same time, none of them showed any fear or hesitation. Neither did they show the demented frenzy inherent to most abominations.

They just slowly marched into the snow, stretching into a wide line that seemed to encompass the front of the blizzard.

A few moments later, the first of the Nightmare Creatures collapsed, its corpse swiftly becoming encased in ice.

Standing on the tall cliff, Sunny pursed his lips in disdain.

'Weak.'

Not that he needed these useless things to be strong. No, their purpose was different… it was to show him which type of Nightmare Creature was the most resistant to the Winter Beast's cold.

From what he could tell, the cursed thing was not that powerful physically… at least as far as Titans went. It did not rule a legion of powerful minions, either. What made the Winter Beast so lethal was its uncanny ability to freeze everything around it to death — corporeal or incorporeal, weak or strong, pure or corrupted.

Close to the heart of the blizzard, even time itself seemed slower, as if the chilling cold could freeze the very laws of existence.

Sunny might have been burning with murderous hatred, but he had not lost his reason. If he wanted to kill this Corrupted Titan, he needed to understand it first. Only after dismantling the secrets of the Winter Beast's power would he be able to slay it.

And these thralls were the sacrifice he had prepared to throw into the deathly cold to comprehend it.

Soon, they disappeared from sight. Sunny could not see his sacrificial pawns anymore, but Soul Serpent still shared a connection with them. Therefore, he could know if the Larvae were still moving or had fallen still.

There were all kinds of Nightmare Creatures under his command, and by studying which ones lasted longer, he would be able to determine

a few things about the lethal cold.

'Come on. Die for me.'

And yet, in the end, Sunny was disappointed.

Because none of them lasted long.

The small army of thralls he had so laboriously created in the past few weeks was obliterated in mere minutes, none of them making it that far into the snowstorm. The cold did not differentiate between large monsters or small, those with affinity to ice or those without. All of them were drained of warmth or frozen solid, dying a meaningless death in the embrace of the Winter Beast's unholy power.

Sunny cursed, then sighed with regret.

'No matter.'

The absence of a result was a result in and of itself. The fact that there did not seem to be a kind of resistance effective against the authority of the Winter Beast's profane domain told Sunny a lot, as well.

He had contemplated several strategies for just that kind of outcome. These strategies were risky, yes… but, actually, he did not feel regretful. Because they were also much more direct and brutal.

Killing the wretched Titan in such a fashion was bound to be much more satisfying.

Down in the crumbled valley, the blizzard suddenly expanded, as if coming to life. A terrible wind blew, crushing into Sunny with a chilling force. The wall of swirling snow and ice particles slowly advanced, moving in his direction.

A dark smile split his face in half.

"Look at that, Serpent. We seem to have been spotted."

He had hoped that hiding in the shadows on top of a distant

mountain would be enough to throw the Titan off his scent, but he had been wrong. Perhaps the creature had been aware of his presence all along, but did not bother to react until he dared to challenge it directly.

In any case, the Corrupted Titan, Winter Beast, was finally rising to deal with the Transcendent Terror, Sunless.

Sunny let out a sigh, then moved his shoulders to stretch his stiff muscles.

"I guess I'll have to finish the preparations faster."

With that, he glanced at the towering figure of the Mountain King that stood in the darkness behind him.

Under his gaze, the tyrant suddenly turned into a torrent of black liquid, which then reformed itself into a different, equally ghastly abomination.

A Spire Messenger now stood on the edge of the cliff, its terrifying black beak cutting the wind like a dark blade. The creature's once pale body was now utterly black, and its many powerful limbs pierced the ice with long, sharp talons.

Throwing one last look at the approaching snowstorm, Sunny jumped onto its back. In the next moment, the mighty wings of the creature raised a hurricane, and it shot into the air, carrying him back in the direction of Erebus Field.

The snowstorm followed.

Chapter-1653: Erebus

The monstrous Spire Messenger tore apart the gelid wind as it raced across the frigid vastness of the twilight sky. Behind it, a churning wall of dancing snow crawled slowly, devouring the world like a hungry beast.

There was a gaunt figure kneeling on the back of the flying monster, clutching at its black feathers with an onyx gauntlet.

Sunny did not look back, knowing that Serpent was much faster than the pursuing titan. In that, at least, they held an advantage.

'It will catch up soon enough, though.'

He was contemplating the results of sacrificing his swarm of thralls.

None of them had been able to withstand the lethal cold of the Winter Beast's domain for long, which meant that there was no type of resistance that could help Sunny survive there — at least none he could find in a short amount of time.

The thralls had perished swiftly, sapped of warmth of life. Their bodies fell into the snow, slowly turning into ice sculptures.

The conclusion, then… was that Sunny had to use something other than a living being to reach the heart of the snowstorm. That would suggest that an undead creature would fare better, but that was not true. There had been a few ghouls among the thralls, and they died just the same.

'But there is a much simpler solution.'

He didn't have to enter the heart of the sinister blizzard himself or send one of his Shadows. He could simply… use an inanimate object.

A projectile.

Indeed, the simplest solution was most often the correct one. The best way to kill the Winter Beast was to simply bring down a deluge of ranged attacks on its head… or whatever it was that it had instead of a head.

Sunny had not been able to do something like that in the past because there was no telling where the titan's actual manifestation hid within the vast snowstorm. Now, however… his shadow sense could extend across many kilometers. Even if he failed to find the Winter Beast's precise location, he could at least pinpoint the general area.

'That is if that thing even has a physical body. For all I know, it could be a sentient storm.'

That was one of the risks he had to face. The other problem was actually delivering a ranged attack across such a vast distance. Not only was it physically hard, but the fatal cold and the hurricane wind raging within the snowstorm would become an obstacle… the closer one got to its heart, the worse they became.

But where there was a will, there was a way.

And if that will was killing intent… someone was going to die by the end of their battle, one way or another.

Leaning forward to resist the frigid wind, Sunny smiled.

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Some time later, he was sitting on the snow, shielded from the wind by a wall of onyx scales. That wall, of course, was Serpent's side — his Shadow's Soul Beast form had grown truly immense now that it was a Transcendent Terror.

Serpent was still far from reaching Daeron's size, of course, but it was rather daunting nevertheless. Its maw looked like it could swallow an entire military APC whole.

The two of them were in the middle of the icy plain that had been

Erebus Field once. Most of the destroyed siege capital was buried under lava rock and snow, with only a few ravaged structures protruding above it like skeletal remains.

Sunny was sitting with the tall peak of Mount Erebus behind him. In front of him, far in the distance, the world was slowly disappearing beneath a veil of swirling snow.

The already dismal temperature was dropping by the minute, and the winds were growing more violent.

He looked disinterested, staring at the snow with a frozen expression. The deep darkness of his eyes was cold and placid… like the surface of an ocean ready to explode into a raging storm.

"It has finally arrived, huh?"

Sunny took a deep breath and finally looked up, studying the distant snowstorm. Its approach was deceptively slow, but he knew that the wall of snow would consume everything around him very soon.

Serpent hissed, the deep sound of its voice reverberating across the icy plain.

"...It's time to start, then."

Sunny's words hung in the frigid air for a moment and were swiftly swallowed by the howling of the wind.

A split second later, though...

The world shook.

Cracks formed on the vast field of snow, and far behind him, the mouth of Mount Erebus suddenly exploded with a gargantuan pillar of ash. A terrifying gust of hot wind rolled across the desolate landscape, pushing back the cold for a moment. Then, the volcano shone with an angry red glow, and a fountain of incandescent lava shot skyward with a deafening roar.

Mount Erebus was erupting.

Of course, it did not just happen to erupt precisely when Sunny needed it. Instead, he had sent Fiend into its depths to find a ripe magma chamber and cause an eruption when the time was right.

With Goliath having already destabilized the entire region, doing so was not too hard. And with Fiend's robust steel carapace and fire affinity, he could survive inside a volcanic explosion without much trouble. Granted… the little hoodlum would not be happy with its master once he returned.

If both of them survived what was coming next, of course.

As the wall of swirling snow approached Sunny from the front, devouring the world, a rolling cloud of ash spread from Mount Erebus behind him. The stench of sulfur permeated the frigid air, cold wind crashing into a wave of heat in an invisible collision. Sunny's hair danced as a vast darkness swallowed the sky, plunging the icy plain in its shadow.

As everything around him became enveloped in shadows, a sinister smile appeared on Sunny's pale face.

He stretched, and then slowly rose to his feet.

The cold darkness dwelling in his eyes finally exploded, turning into vicious glee.

Looking at the approaching storm, Sunny raised his fist and said, his voice trembling with barely suppressed rage:

"Hey, Winter Beast… do you remember me?"

Then, his voice grew calmer, and colder, full of murderous wrath.

"...Probably not. But I remember you."

Chapter-1654: Opening Salvo

As ash rained from the sky and the ground quaked, Sunny inhaled deeply and extended his shadow sense as far as he could. Soon, his mind was flooded with an avalanche of sensory data, almost making him dizzy.

He was still unaccustomed to how vast his sight was now. Of course, he didn't actually see anything… but after years of perceiving the shapes and movements of the shadows, it was not much different. Sunny had tested his limits while relying on his shadow sense to stay alive in the ocean, but the dark depths were different from land.

They were unfathomable and empty, with nothing but the cold currents to see.

Here in the Antarctic Center, though, there was almost too much to sense.

Further, further, and further still… Sunny filtered out the useless data to keep his Transcendent mind from overloading and reached across many kilometers of cracking ice toward the approaching snowstorm.

Soon, he sensed the shadows trembling from the lethal cold. Even they were not spared from the cruel tyranny of the Winter Beast.

'Somewhere between forty and fifty kilometers… this is as far as I can reach.'

His shadow sense reached further than his actual sight, which was limited due to the curvature of Earth. And yet, it wasn't enough to find the heart of the vast blizzard — at least not until it got closer and enveloped him.

'Still, it is already close enough for the initial greeting.'

Sunny extended a hand. A thin pillar of darkness rose from the ground, growing to stand at almost twice his height. Then, it solidified, turning into a inky-black javelin with a needle-sharp tip. He grasped and weighed it, looking at the towering wall of swirling snow with a cold expression.

He had created the javelin in the image of the Siege Souvenir — a similar weapon he had once fashioned to slay Goliath. The original Souvenir had been made from the quill of a Corrupted abomination, while this one was merely a manifested shadow. However, that shadow had been suffused with his Transcendent essence, and was thus equal to a Transcendent weapon.

A uniquely powerful one at that, due to the fact that his soul had been altered by Soul Weave.

Sadly, the shadow javelin lacked the powerful enchantments that the real Siege Souvenir had possessed. Still… it was not bad for an opening salvo.

Exhaling slowly, Sunny took a step forward. Using the full augmentation of his five shadows, he infused a torrent of essence into his muscles and tendons, pushed against the ground with his feet, and strained his entire body to whip his hand forward and send the javelin into the dark sky.

The moment he threw it, the world quaked again. A cloud of ashen snow exploded from under his feet, and a thunderous boom tore through the roaring of the eruption. There was an invisible shockwave that pushed the snow and the falling ash away, creating a sphere of clarity around his ominous onyx figure for a few fleeting moments.

The javelin was like a black comet as it shot across the lightless sky, its speed immeasurable. However… the actual process was rather dull. It actually took it an entire minute to reach the wall of snow and disappear into it. Twenty or so seconds later, Sunny felt his connection to the infused essence disappear.

At the same time, he sensed the javelin plummet into the snow and shatter into countless shards of ice, which then dissolved into an

intangible shadow.

The corner of his mouth twitched.

'...Not enough.'

With the volcano erupting behind him and the gargantuan wall of snow that connected heavens and earth racing to swallow him from the front, Sunny stared forward with a dark expression and did some mental calculation.

'I am no better than an artillery cannon, distance-wise. Granted, that javelin of mine was about twenty-five times heavier than an average artillery shell. Still, I would need to be inside the storm to reach its eye.'

He grimaced with displeasure. All these mathematics… was not exactly what he had wanted. What he had wanted was to get up close and personal with the Winter Beast, and feel its blood flow down his hands. However, reality was never what one wanted.

Well… maybe not, considering that Sunny had gotten exactly what he wanted. He had gotten his freedom. And everything else that had come with it.

In any case, the distance was not that important. Much more important was the fact that the javelin had been able to survive for more than twenty seconds in the outer reaches of the snowstorm. That… was something Sunny could work with.

Of course, he still did not know how long his missiles would last in the inner hell of the Winter Beast's domain.

He shook his head, let out a resentful sigh, and glanced at his Shadow.

"...War is a boring affair, isn't it, Serpent?"

Serpent raised its gargantuan head into the air and hissed, perhaps expressing its solidarity.

Sunny smiled.

"Let's make it a bit more exciting, then."

As the first torrents of snow swirled around him and plunged the world into unbearable cold, Sunny raised his head to the dark sky and laughed.

A few moments later, his laughter disappeared abruptly, and his face suddenly turned still. Only his eyes gleamed with a strange, dark excitement.

Something stirred in their depths…

And at the same time, the darkness around Sunny stirred, as well.

Dozens of inky-black pillars rose from the ground, followed by dozens more. They rose into the swirling stow like the fangs of a dragon, their needle-sharp points parting the wind with shrill whistles.

Then, just as many tendrils of darkness wrapped around the shadow javelins, turning into inky-black hands. Each hand had seven fingers, ending with sharp claws.

Sunny raised a hand, and at the same time, the shadow hands raised the great javelins.

He stared into the swirling snow with a cold smile.

He was not satisfied with being a Transcendent siege engine. To welcome the Winter Beast, he was prepared to summon forth an entire division's worth of devastating artillery.

"I'm going to drown you, bastard."

Letting out a low growl, he waved his hand forward.

The world seemed to shatter from the thunderous roar when countless black javelins tore the swirling snow apart and shot into the depths of the raging blizzard.

Chapter-1655: Rain of Destruction

Dozens of black javelins shot into the raging snow, violently tearing a path through the blizzard. Each weighed more than a ton and moved with supersonic speed… the devastation they could visit upon the desolate landscape of the Antarctic Center was immeasurable.

But much more important than the kinetic force they carried was the mystical force of their Transcendent nature. In the world of the Nightmare Spell, there were rules and laws that trampled reason… a Corrupted Titan like the Winter Beast could shrug off a railgun shell, but it couldn't ignore the blade of a Saint.

Sunny had always known about this odd dichotomy, but only now that he was a Transcendent had he gained a hint of understanding regarding it. He had vaguely sensed on many occasions the world pushing against him, and his will pushing back against the world.

The higher one's Rank was, the more they were able to resist the pressure of the mundane and forcefully exert their will upon the world… as well as other living beings populating it, when two transcendent wills clashed.

That was why, perhaps, a powerful abomination could survive a nuclear blast, but not a blow delivered to it by an Awakened such as him. Because an explosion did not carry an Awakened's lethal will.

In any case, the Winter Beast was going to have a problem dealing with the black javelins, both because of the mundane force they carried, and the mystical force infused in them.

That was if Sunny could actually hit the creature, of course.

Blinded by snow, he closed his eyes and concentrated on sensing the

shadows. His body was assaulted by unbearable cold, the crushing wind trying to bring him down. The wind was growing more ferocious, and the cold was becoming more calamitous by the second. The waves of heat rolling off the exploding volcano lessened the cruelty of the snowstorm a little, but not by much.

Counting the seconds, Sunny concentrated on the distant place where the cold was the most terrible. Out there, even shadows could not withstand it, becoming frozen and still. There was a vast blind spot in his field of perception… so, even though he could not sense the body of the Winter Beast, he knew where to aim the javelins.

'Come on!'

There were almost fifteen seconds left before his missiles reached the target area. Which did not mean that Sunny would simply wait patiently…

"Serpent."

Responding to his voice, the giant creature turned into a tide of darkness and flowed under his armor. A few moments later, it had already turned into a serpentine tattoo.

As it did, Sunny sensed the amount of spirit essence he could absorb from the surrounding darkness increase dramatically. He suspected that it was either because of Serpent's new Ability or because of its [Shadow Guide] Attribute having undergone an evolution.

In the past, that Attribute allowed Serpent to help Sunny control his shadow essence better, so who was to say that it couldn't guide the ambient essence of elemental shadows into his soul, as well?

Thankfully, Sunny was currently shrouded in darkness. The twilight sky was obscured by the cloud of ash that had mixed with snow, so no light reached the plain. Even the red glow of the erupting Mount Erebus had been swallowed by the raging snowstorm, drowning the buried ruins of the destroyed siege capital in deep shadows. The lightless world was full of spirit essence.

Which was a good thing, considering that he was not holding back

and burning through his own essence recklessly.

"More!"

Long before the first salvo of the black javelins reached its target, the second salvo flew into the seething veil of snow. The world shook and quaked from the deafening roar of their passing, and from the aftershocks of the continuing eruption, as well.

The third salvo was sent into the storm not long after that.

For a while, Sunny was surrounded by a thunderous cacophony of violent shockwaves and the pained howling of the ravaged wind. A dark smile appeared on his face, and he basked in the cataclysmic fury that devoured everything around him.

It was a shame that he could not use Serpent better in this fight… there were many forms that his Shadow could assume, but none of them would really counter the profane power of the Winter Beast. On the contrary, all of them would be vulnerable to it.

The same went for his avatars… facing an enemy like that, his best strategy was to consolidate all the power available to him in one source. In himself.

'Still, it's not too bad.'

Sunny found the way the battle was developing rather exciting.

That was until the first wave of javelins finally reached the heart of the snowstorm, though.

His smile dimmed a little.

"Curses."

The very first javelin had survived more than twenty seconds in the snowstorm. But the force of the wind and the fatal cold were much more dire close to the area where the Winter Beast was hiding — some of the shadow projectiles were thrown off course by the hurricane, falling into the snow with thunderous explosions.

The rest were swallowed by the cold and sapped of power, turning dead and brittle. Despite how much effort Sunny had poured into them, the speed and power of the black javelins ended up being insufficient. Even if they struck the body of the titan, they would just shatter into ice without leaving a mark on it.

As the fourth salvo shot into the snowstorm, Sunny dismissed the shadow hands and opened his eyes, looking ahead grimly. There was still hope… the Winter Beast was drawing closer with each second, so the second and third salvos would have spent less time in the blizzard by the time they reached its heart.

And yet, Sunny felt pessimistic.

Just as he had expected, the second salvo only managed to devastate a swathe of the plain in front of the titan's intangible fortress of fatal cold. The third one was swallowed without leaving a scar on the storm.

He grimaced.

'No, no… it's for the better.'

Sunny had been afraid that there would be no chance for him to clash with the wretched creature face-to-face. No, it seemed that his worries had been unfounded.

If he wanted to kill something well, he had to kill it with his own two hands. Was that the saying?

As he sighed and took a step back, the fourth and final salvo hit.

However, it did not strike the heart of the snowstorm. Instead, each of the javelins struck a particular spot on the vast field of snow, producing an earth-shattering explosion.

And in response to that devastating attack, the snow split open across the entire region, unleashing a torrent of angry red glow.

Chapter-1656: Into the Storm

The entire region where Erebus Field had once stood suddenly fractured. Vast fissures opened in the snow, widening with each moment. Immense sheets of snow tilted and slid underground, collapsing as they turned into billowing avalanches.

At the same time, the fissures glowed with angry red light, and torrents of lava shot from them, devouring the plain. The world was enveloped by a raging blizzard, so no one would have been able to see the awesome spectacle of the fiery cataclysm — Sunny himself only saw flowers of orange glow blooming here and there in the howling darkness.

He swayed, struggling to stay on his feet.

The chain reaction of chaos and destruction that the fourth salvo of the black javelins had caused was his measure in case a melee clash with the Winter Beast seemed unavoidable. The terrible heat of the molten lava was not going to put a dent into the titanic snowstorm, of course — in fact, the lava was already turning into volcanic glass.

However, more of it shot from underground. An immeasurable amount of snow had been instantly turned into great clouds of boiling steam, which then swiftly turned into a torrent of hail. The whole world was torn apart by the clash between the incinerating heat and the obliterating cold, becoming consumed by chaos.

The cold was winning, of course… but it was also being weakened, even if not by much. Considering that Sunny was about to face the very worst of it, though, every little bit counted.

As for the sudden collapse of the snow field, that was Saint's doing. Fiend had been responsible for starting the volcanic eruption, but Mount Erebus was at a distance. If Sunny wanted to drown the Winter Beast in lava, he had to make sure that the whole region

would crack open.

That was not that hard to achieve, considering that the ruins of the siege capital buried under his feet were already unstable. With Saint creating channels for the lava to flow and deepening the already existing caverns, all Sunny had to do to cause a cascading collapse was deliver powerful shocks to shatter the meticulously prepared weak points in the icy crust.

After that, nature would take its course.

Of course, it was a bit degrading to use a great warrior like Saint to dig glorified trenches. But that was what made the Winter Beast so vile — its cold countered most of Sunny's powers and made it impossible for his subordinates to fully exert theirs.

'I'll just have to make sure it pays for that affront, as well.'

As he felt the very life being slowly sapped from his body by the killing cold, Sunny took a few more steps back and then inhaled deeply, ignoring the feeling of his lungs being cut by icy blades.

'Not that far, now…'

The darkness around him surged, shrouding his figure in a vast mantle. He allowed himself to turn into an intangible shadow and then manifested himself back into the world, building a towering Shell around the dark incarnation.

This was the safest Shell Sunny could create, one that posed no threat of his mind being pulled into the abyss of formlessness. Because it was created in the image of himself.

Slowly, a dark giant rose above the quaking plain. It was gaunt, with long hair that billowed in the wind like a sable waterfall. His eyes were like two abyssal wells, and the expression on his inky-black face was both cold and savage.

The hurricane wind crushed into the immense chest of the Shadow Colossus and was repelled, howling mournfully as it died. Vast plates of stonelike metal encased his gaunt and muscular body, creating a fearsome onyx carapace.

As the heart of the snowstorm drew nearer and nearer, the dark giant slowly lowered himself, his knee sending a net of cracks through the thick layer of impenetrable ice. Then, he leaned down and supported his immense weight with both palms.

Finally, the colossus grew still, his head lowered. His pose… was like that of an athlete preparing to explode into a run.

'Twenty seconds, huh?'

Sunny felt darkly fascinated by the immediate future.

That was how long his javelins had been able to survive in the outer reaches of the snowstorm. Some had made it most of the way into the heart of the profane blizzard before turning into shattered ice. He was much more powerful than a manifested shadow, though. He was a Transcendent Terror, both his body and his onyx carapace augmented five times over by the shadows.

Sunny was willing to bet that his Shell would survive long enough for him to witness the true appearance of the Winter Beast.

…He would probably have mere seconds to live after that, though. So, something had to happen in those seconds to end the battle in his favor.

'I like it!'

A strange, sinister, thunderous noise suddenly resounded in the raging blizzard.

It was the sound of the Shadow Colossus laughing.

Then, his laughter turned into a chilling growl, and the towering giant exploded forward like a dark tsunami.

An entire area of the snow field was obliterated by his initial push. A crushing shockwave spread from the point where Sunny's foot dug into the ice, but he was moving faster than it.

Faster, and faster, and faster still!

The shadow giant tore through the snowstorm as he ran, effortlessly leaping over the vastest of fissures and sending fountains of incandescent lava into the sky when he stepped in them, as if stepping into puddles. His speed increased more and more, until it was as if a black meteor was flying above the snow, moving parallel to it.

The bitter cold sank into the towering colossus, trying to shackle him and slow him down. But Sunny simply broke through the cold, even as he felt the outer layers of his Shell turn to ice.

The heart of the snowstorm was already in front of him. He dove into its terrible embrace, trying to accelerate even more.

In the end, the cold was just too much.

With his giant body impacted by its fatal force, Sunny couldn't keep up anymore. He lost his balance and fumbled, almost falling down. There was no time to take the next step.

And yet, his speed was so great that he was carried forward by pure inertia.

That inertia…

Was just enough to bring him into the eye of the storm.

There, Sunny finally saw the Winter Beast.

The frozen lips of the Shadow Colossus shattered into pieces as he bared his teeth in a vicious grin.

'Well, aren't you ugly...'

Chapter-1657: Heart of Winter

The snowstorm manifested by the Winter Beast was like a rolling cataclysm, with devastating winds carrying a seething mass of swirling snow and tiny ice particles. Close to its heart, the ice particles were like a myriad of razor-sharp blades, shredding anything that had not been frozen by the unholy cold already.

Each of the countless shards of ice had been a part of someone slain by the blizzard once, perhaps.

And yet, absolute peace reigned in the heart of the storm. A vast area beyond the invisible fortress wall of suffocating cold was entirely devoid of wind, snow, and ice… everything was flawlessly still, as if nothing could move in this frigid kingdom, not even the winds of the blizzard itself.

With the sky above shrouded by ash, it was dark here, with frozen rivers of lava glowing dimly as they turned to glass. The heat of the underground rivers of molten rock was powerless against the profane power of the Corrupted Titan… and yet, it was enough to buy Sunny a second or two more.

The Winter Beast itself was floating above the ground in the middle of its frozen kingdom.

When Sunny first saw it, he was taken aback.

The creature… was eerie and grotesque, unlike anything he had ever seen. Just witnessing it made him feel appalled, as if his senses were trying to reject the existence of such a being.

The Winter Beast could not be called a beast, at all. Instead, it was an expansive, ethereal structure made of ice, as if countless torrents of water had frozen when they exploded outward from a hidden source. It would have been beautiful if it wasn't so… organic.

Although the titan's body was made of ice, it also looked like a living creature. The twisting pillars of ice vaguely resembled parts of a mangled body... limbs, organs, torn intestines, broken bones, and desiccated flesh. It was as though a giant being had been meticulously disassembled into countless parts, and then violently fused together in macabre disorder.

There were dark shapes of other Nightmare Creatures fused into the ice here and there, as well, still and lifeless.

The ice was pale and bleak, but the Winter Beast itself was nevertheless full of color.

That was because numerous flowers bloomed on the ice, their petals an intense azure color. The contrast between their vibrant beauty and the appalling body of the creature beneath was hideously striking.

Vast plumes of snow drifted from the flowers like pollen, shrouding the Winter Beast in a frosty haze.

It was both beautiful and harrowing… but mostly harrowing.

…At the very heart of the eerie abomination, barely visible through the ice, a small shadow was encased in it. Sunny thought that it resembled the remains of a human being, but he wasn't sure.

In any case, he was momentarily lost as to what to do. How was one even supposed to fight such a creature?

But his hesitation only lasted for a split second.

Still carried forward by inertia and having lost his balance, the Shadow Colossus fell and rolled over his shoulder. The ground quaked from the terrible force of the impact, and the thin layer of volcanic glass cracked under his weight, a fountain of molten lava shooting into the air — only to freeze a moment later into an abstract sculpture.

At the same time, the frozen pauldron of the Onyx Mantle shattered into countless pieces of black ice, and the giant's shoulder beneath it became covered by a net of deep cracks.

The outer layers of the Shell had already been turned to ice, and were now fracturing under the strain of his movements. It seemed as though the giant's skin was peeling, revealing the black mess of firm muscles underneath.

It did not matter.

Sunny was already exiting the roll, propelling himself forward into a powerful leap. The Winter Beast moved slightly, the azure mountain of its body hovering above the snow. Some of the twisting, vaguely organic pillars of ice moved, as well… unfurling slowly, as if preparing to explode forward and receive the shadow giant into their embrace.

Sunny shuddered as he flew through the frozen hell toward the harrowing creature. But it was too late for regret. Now that he had jumped, there was no turning back, and no choosing a different strategy.

'Die!'

A stifled roar escaped through the dark giant's bared teeth.

Sunny fell on the Winter Beast from above, but just then, countless spikes of ice extended from the creature's body and tore through his armor, impaling the damaged Shell. Not paying it any attention, he immediately grabbed the thickest of the ice spears and pulled himself lower across its length, leaving a trail of dissipating shadows behind.

In the place where his hand touched the ice, the gauntlet of the Onyx Mantle disintegrated into a haze of ice, and two of his fingers broke off.

Sunny sensed the twisted pillars of ice flowing forward to encompass him. The unbearable cold permeated the entire mass of the Shadow Colossus Shell, sending waves of pain through his soul.

His dark eyes surged with murderous fury.

In the next moment, the impaled giant slid low enough to reach the actual body of the abominable titan. His feet touched the ground.

Crushing countless azure flowers, he stretched his hands and grabbed onto the grotesque shape of the titan, his claws digging into the killing ice.

And then…

Sunny pulled the Winter Beast into the shadows.

'Let me help you off your throne, you abominable wretch…'

In war, the best advantage one could gain was fighting on a battlefield of their choosing. Sunny was currently in the very heart of the Winter Beast's storm, where his enemy wielded the most power. So…

He was going to carry both of them away from this frozen hell.

Shadow Step had undergone an evolution during his Transcendence, so Sunny could carry living beings with him now. Sadly, he could not leave them in the dark realm of shadows… but he could very well transport them to someplace else in the material world. The range of his teleportation had also increased drastically due to how far his shadow sense could reach.

Of course, teleporting a Corrupted Titan against its will, and over a vast distance, was going to burn an immeasurable amount of his essence.

But it was more than worth it.

'Come! Come with me, beast!'

He would have grinned if his lips hadn't been frozen and shattered already.

Sunny exerted all of his power to pull the Winter Beast into the shadows. The titan tried to resist, but it was of no use. Perhaps if it had reacted sooner, or knew the enemy better, such an outcome could have been prevented... but not anymore.

Even when the hands dragging the creature into the darkness turned to ice and shattered, it was already too late.

In the next moment, unbelievably…

The crumbling giant made of shadows and the appalling creature of azure flowers and pale ice suddenly disappeared from the frigid stillness of the snowstorm's heart.

…A split second later, both of them emerged from the darkness in the infernal depths of Mount Erebus, plummeting into a vast lake of incandescent magma.

Chapter-1658: Burning Wrath

Sunny's crumbling Shell and the eerie ice flower of the Winter Beast's vessel plummeted from the darkness into the vast lake of bubbling magma. The frozen hell of the calamitous snowstorm had been left behind, and although Mount Erebus was already swallowed in its ruinous embrace, the unholy cold did not reach this underground cauldron.

However, the Winter Beast had brought the cold, the snow, and the storm with it.

The azure flowers growing from the corpses of the Nightmare Creatures that the ice had encased were still blooming with plumes of snow, and the creature itself was like the heart of an endless, empty, cold abyss.

Several things happened before Sunny and his enemy plunged into the churning magma.

First, the vast cloud of snow surrounding the Winter Beast instantly evaporated. Second, the surface of the fiery lake instantly cooled, turning into black glass. Third, the sudden changes in pressure and temperature, as well as the sudden expansion of a vast mass of boiling gas, caused a titanic explosion, throwing Sunny and the dreadful abomination apart.

The explosion shattered the dome of the underground chamber and the crust of the recently frozen magma, which in turn started a chain reaction of devastating destruction.

Far above and outside, the erupting Erebus shuddered and quaked, gargantuan stones exploding into the frigid air like cannonballs. A terrifying crack split one of its slopes, and after another cataclysmic quake, the entire side of the fuming mountain crumbled.

…Letting the wind, the ice, and the snow of the unholy storm pour deep into the interior of the erupting volcano, where the blizzard came into contact with the endless mass of molten rock.

A secondary explosion tore apart the snowstorm and shook the very heavens, much more terrifying than the first. As indescribable destruction spread, a towering mushroom cloud rose above the frozen ruins of Erebus Field, dwarfing the first one.

All across the Antarctic Center, the ground shook. Avalanches rolled down from snowy peaks, and several mountains collapsed. The ice encasing the frozen ocean split open, and towering waves of black water rolled from below.

Deep underground, Sunny felt like he was caught in the middle of a collapsing star. Bombarded by devastating concussive waves from all sides, wreathed in incinerating flames and suffocating cold, he moved his damaged Shell to dodge the giant boulders that fell from above.

The boulders crashed into the crust of frozen magma, breaking it and causing immense geysers of molten rock to shoot upward. Those geysers were immediately frozen, turning into glass pillars, only to be shattered a moment later and collapse in a rain of obsidian shards.

It was a scene of absolute chaos, like a chilling glimpse of fiery hell.

Sunny wanted to laugh.

'...Did I complain that the battle was not exciting enough?'

In this life, it seemed, all his wishes were destined to be granted.

The mangled colossus made of pure darkness lunged toward the grotesque shape of the Winter Beast.

The Shell was in poor shape.

The Onyx Mantle was cracked and fractured all over. It was repairing itself, but not fast enough to make a difference. His face was missing most of its skin, revealing his black teeth and slightly protruding canines… in that moment, it resembled Weaver's demonic mask much more than his face.

Both hands of the dark giant had turned to ice and shattered when he grabbed the Winter Beast, leaving him with no means of holding a weapon.

But that was fine. Sunny himself was a weapon.

Reaching the titan in several ferocious leaps, Sunny used all of his mass and all of his momentum to deliver a devastating kick to the eerie ice creature.

The blow was truly terrifying.

Even though the Winter Beast had used countless tendrils of ice to block it, most of them were shattered and exploded into a barrage of deadly ice shards. A net of cracks spread over the innermost surface of its hideous body, as well. Much more importantly, the creature was thrown down, crashing through the crust of magma and plunging into the flaming depths of the hellish cauldron.

Of course, Sunny was not unscathed, either.

In fact, his entire left foot had turned to ice and broke off, taking with it the better part of the shin.

He briefly thought that the sight of him would be rather comical… if it wasn't so terrifying.

Because losing three out of his four limbs did not quench Sunny's murderous wrath one bit.

The crumbling colossus roared viciously as it fell.

The Winter Beast was not damaged by the incandescent magma at all, even if it directly opposed the power of unholy cold. Instead, the entire lake of magma cooled, its very heart turning into a vast expanse of black glass.

Thanks to that…

The titan was momentarily trapped in obsidian, fused into it like the corpses of the Nightmare Creatures were fused into the hideous ice of its body.

Sunny was full of furious glee at receiving that moment.

Using the [Feather of Truth] trait of the Onyx Mantle, he turned himself as heavy as he could, and toppled straight onto the immobilized abomination.

With no hands to deliver a blow, he brought his head down on the cracked ice. The force of the impact was so terrible that there was a flash of light, and the entire mountain shook.

The dark giant's skull cracked… but the cold carapace of the Winter Beast finally cracked, as well, a myriad of ice shards flying away.

It moved, easily breaking free of the obsidian lake. The gargantuan stalks of ice moved as well, wrapping around Sunny and pulling him closer to the ice. At the same time, ice spikes formed below him, shooting forward to impale his mutilated Shell.

The upper part of his broken head was already fused with the ice, turning still and brittle from the frost. Almost immobilized, Sunny was being swiftly assimilated into the Winter Beast's body.

All around him was pale ice, painted beautifully in shades of vivid azure.

He was caught.

…Caught exactly where he wanted to be.

Instead of trying to free himself from the icy tomb, Sunny used his broken limbs to push himself further down, into the fracture that he had created in the frigid carapace of the profane titan.

And there…

He snarled, and used his bared teeth to bite down ferociously on the vague shape at the heart of the eerie ice creature.

Chapter-1659: Hour of Reckoning

The skull of Sunny's battered Shell had cracked, and the upper part of it had fused with the ice. That part was torn off when he pushed what remained of his body into the fractured ice, spilling shadows like a tide of black blood.

But his jaws were still intact.

With most of his limbs gone and his colossal body swiftly turning into ice, Sunny let out a frenzied growl as he opened his skeletal maw and bit down on the small silhouette encased in the heart of the Winter Beast's appalling vessel.

Slicing it in half.

A moment later, his teeth exploded into a rain of ice. His mutilated Shell was far too damaged, and would have already crumbled if it had not been fused into ice, becoming a part of it.

His soul was cold, cold… cold enough that even the terrible pain ravaging it had been swallowed by a peaceful numbness. That peace was a herald of death.

But none of it mattered.

Because the moment Sunny destroyed the source of the Winter Beast, the abominable sculpture of ice that served as its body shuddered.

And then, it started to crack.

He heard a gleeful laughter ring in his mind, breaking through the haze of stillness that was consuming it. Glee, triumph, vindication, pain, sorrow, guilt, hatred… countless emotions were fused into that

laugh, creating an eerily disturbing mixture.

Sunny recognized the laughter as his own.

Or was it a scream?

He was laughing… because the Winter Beast was dead. There was no Nightmare Spell to celebrate his kill, but Sunny had sensed a trickle of shadow fragments entering his soul.

The harrowing titan, Winter Beast, the bane of the Antarctic Center and the executioner of Falcon Scott, the abominable horror that had stolen the lives of Sunny's soldiers and taught him how unbearably crushing a defeat can be, was gone.

Slain by his own hand, no less.

Vengeance… was so sweet.

But that sweetness was also so indescribably bitter, because it carried the memories of what it was exactly that Sunny had longed to avenge.

'Ah…'

Imprisoned in the depths of a frozen Shell, Sunny cut off his senses for a fleeting moment.

Left alone in the darkness, he whispered:

"This... this is... this is for you."

It was for Belle, Dorn, and Samara. For Professor Obel, Sergeant Gere, and Lieutenant Carin. For numerous others who had perished in Falcon Scott.

And for Sunny himself, who had to live with the scars that the Winter Beast had left on his soul.

'Now… let's finish this.'

The abominable titan was dead, but the ordeal was not quite over

yet. Sunny was still trapped within the icy tomb of the Winter Beast's vessel, and the world was still quaking all around him.

Fearing that the spreading cold would reach the very depths of the frozen Shell and swallow his soul, Sunny dismissed the dark giant. However, the broken colossus did not dissolve into shadows… eerily enough, those parts of it that had been turned to ice by the titan remained solid despite being released.

All Sunny managed to do was create a sphere of empty darkness around himself, where the cold had not yet reached. He hesitated for a split second, then summoned more shadows from the Lantern and swiftly built a new Shell in the broken remains of the old one.

The appalling figure of the Winter Beast was still half-buried in obsidian, towering above it like a hideous masterpiece of sinister art. The azure flowers were wilting. A few moments later, they caught aflame and turned to ash, disappearing into the dark winds of the underground cauldron.

A few moments more, and the cracks covering the carcass of the dreadful titan widened, and then exploded outward when two black hands tore through the ice from the inside. Sunny crawled out of the crumbling titan and allowed his second Shell to dissolve.

Now outside the body of the Winter Beast and able to use Shadow Step again, he instantly teleported some distance away, stepping on the black obsidian with bare feet.

The damage to a Shell was not transferred to the body, but the Onyx Mantle was truly in tatters. It was going to take some time for his armor to restore itself… so, for now, Sunny was left standing there in nothing but the rags of his military bodysuit. No different from how he had been when he returned to Antarctica.

He took a deep breath.

Somewhere outside, far away, the terrible snowstorm was dying down. The profane power that supported it was gone, and so, it was going to disappear without a trace before too long.

The worst of the eruption seemed to have already happened, as well. Most of the lava that had flown from Erebus had been cooled by the blizzard, solidifying into glass and stone. That said, the volcano had been terribly damaged, an entire side of it having collapsed to reveal the fiery caverns within.

Sunny suspected that, if not for the ash, he could have looked up and seen a fragment of the bleak sky even from these depths.

The ground was still quaking, but not as much as before. He waited for a bit, ignoring the sweltering heat and holding his breath in the suffocating fumes of the active volcano.

In front of him, at some distance… the corpse of the Winter Beast was slowly crumbling.

The azure flowers were gone. The pale ice was shattering, unable to withstand its own weight anymore, and melting. The desiccated corpses of the Nightmare Creatures that had been encased in it caught flame and were scattered by the wind.

Soon, it was all over.

Full of an indescribable feeling, Sunny slowly approached the place where the Winter Beast had died.

His enemy was gone, and all that remained… was a scattering of shimmering soul shards, the fragmented remains of his frozen Shell, and a barrow of pale ice.

There was no sign of the vague silhouette that he had bitten in half anywhere in sight. It must have turned to ash like the rest of the corpses fused with the abomination.

The remaining ice — what had been the innermost core of the titan's body once — was not melting, but neither was it radiating a sense of fatal cold. That cold was there, still, but now, it seemed to be contained within the ice instead of spreading outward like a curse.

In the flaming darkness of the obsidian lake, the mystical ice looked almost like frosty metal.

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then sighed, coughed violently, and summoned the Covetous Coffer.

He placed everything inside — the soul shards, the fragments of frozen shadows, and the pieces of pale ice.

"It's over."

The Winter Beast was dead. He had settled the score and avenged himself.

He had avenged everyone else, as well.

His business in Antarctica was finished.

Suddenly, Sunny looked tired.

He glanced around, his gaze a little lost, and then asked quietly:

"Now what?"

Of course, there was no response. There was no one to respond, either.

In the silence of the obsidian lake, Sunny rubbed his face tiredly and closed his eyes.

"I'm tired... of this place."

Not the depths of Mount Erebus. Not the ruins of the Erebus Field, and not even the Antarctic Center.

Sunny felt tired of this world.

Nothing was holding him back here anymore.

And so, he decided to leave.

A dozen seconds later, his figure disappeared from inside the broken volcano… and off the face of the Earth.

He would not return to the waking world for three long, lonesome years.

Chapter-1660: Fragments of a Fleeting Dream

Cassie slowly closed her eyes and turned away from the young man sitting in front of her. His delicate appearance, polite demeanor, and modest smile…

Were so unlike the frightening, unhinged demon she had witnessed in his memories.

Witnessing one's memories was a strange affair, because what had been and what people remembered were usually two different things. Memories were vague, disjointed, and fragile, like the fragments of a fleeting dream. Some were vibrant and deeply etched, some were dull and shallow.

Some were bright. Most were full of sorrow.

But the Shadow Saint possessed an unbelievably clear memory. It was striking, second only to Cassie's own now that she had Transcended. It was as if nothing he had experienced were ever truly erased… at least not the details of the memory he had chosen to show her, which must have been important to him.

What an irony, then, that his whole existence had been erased from the world.

There was a problem with reading his memories, though.

Firstly, the way the man who called himself Sunless perceived the world was simply too strange. Even Cassie, who was uniquely suited to having multiple points of view and had already experienced the way he sensed his surroundings through her Ascended Ability, found herself feeling dizzy from the avalanche of unfamiliar sights and sensations.

Secondly, and more importantly… there were countless gaps in her recollection of what she had seen. Those were the moments where the young man pretending to be a humble shopkeeper thought, spoke, or felt something about the places and events that had been erased from everyone's memories.

In the end, what she had witnessed — or rather, could remember witnessing — was even more disjointed than the memories of ordinary people.

The chilling images…

A young man with alabaster skin crawling from the black water on the cracked ice, his eyes brimming with unfathomable darkness. The eerie city where a terrible slaughter had taken place, but only emptiness remained. The days of slaughter across the desolate expanse of the abandoned continent, the snow turning crimson from the spilled blood.

An aloof figure observing from a cliff as an army of enslaved Nightmare Creatures marched to their deaths into a raging blizzard.

The furious battle under the slopes of an erupting volcano. The harrowing strength both the monster and the man had shown. The culmination of it all… and so much more.

Cassie scowled.

Why, why was it so hard to cling to the very idea of it?

She had to know…

Countless thoughts surfaced in her mind, clicking together as they assembled into chains of logic.

'The frozen siege capital… it must be Falcon Scott, the fallen bastion of the Antarctic Center. He had returned there as a former member of the First Evacuation Army.'

'That winged beast he used as a mount was unmistakably a Spire Messenger. I was right, after all… he was with us on the Forgotten Shore.'

'However, the Fire Keepers only joined the Southern Campaign after the Antarctic Center was swallowed by the Chain of Nightmares. Which means that he was never one of us. What relationship did we have? This strength… was he one of Gunlaug's lieutenants? A prominent hunter of the outer settlement? Someone who paid tribute to live in the castle, like Kai and Aiko?'

He could have been sent to the Forgotten Shore the same year as Cassie and Nephis, but that was exceedingly unlikely. There had been only three people who reached the Dark City that year: Caster, Nephis… and Cassie herself, due to being dragged along by Nephis.

Or… no… had there been someone else? Her memories were vague, which meant…

Her train of thought broke apart and faded, even the memory of having such thoughts disappearing from her mind.

She vaguely sensed what had happened and tried to retrace the steps of her logic, but to no avail. So, Cassie continued to think.

And find more pieces to fill the void.

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Sunny allowed Cassie to contemplate what she had seen for a few minutes. He guessed that it was going to take her a while to come to terms with the Winter Beast's demise.

However, she spoke sooner than he had expected. Turning to face him once again, the blind seer said evenly:

"So… you are the Lord of Shadows."

Sunny shrugged and smiled lazily.

"What if I am?"

She hesitated for a while.

"I know that your second body is currently enjoying a tasteless theater play that we sponsored, while the third one is somewhere in

Song Domain, hiding in the shadows. However, I can't sense the one in Godgrave at all. Curious."

Cassie frowned.

"A powerful anti-divination Memory, perhaps. Or maybe it's the nature of your Citadel."

Sunny tilted his head a little.

"If you know that the play is tasteless, why sponsor it?"

She shrugged.

"Tasteless things have their use, as well."

'How Machiavellian of her.'

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, then sighed.

"In any case, I would prefer it if you didn't share the fact that the Lord of Shadows and me are the same person. Especially with Changing Star."

Cassie's frown deepened.

"You want me to deceive Nephis? Why?"

He stared at her with no particular emotion on his face.

"I get it that you are overwhelmed, Saint Cassia, but think about it for a moment. Unlike you, she is unable to remember that she has forgotten something. So, she wouldn't know that the three of us share a connection. All she would remember is that there is a person pretending to be a Master here in Bastion, who is actually a powerful and not entirely friendly Saint residing in a Death Zone.

Our relationship would become strained in that case, and it definitely would not become any better."

Sunny smiled.

"Plus, this incarnation of mine is really just a humble shopkeeper. It's

like a vacation… I wouldn't want my peaceful life to be spoiled. Who knows what will happen to my mental state if my only source of peace disappears in a puff of smoke."

Cassie met his gaze with her unseeing eyes, then sighed.

"Fine. I'll keep your secret. As long as you don't scheme to harm Nephis, of course. If you do…"

Her expression didn't change, but the air in the stone chamber suddenly seemed terribly cold.

Sunny's smile dimmed a little.

"Why would I harm Changing Star? She is the cornerstone of my survival, after all. And therefore, the integral part of my plans."

The blind seer raised an eyebrow.

"Your… plans? And what are you planning exactly, Lord Shadow… Sunny?"

He laughed, then abruptly fell silent.

After a while, Sunny spoke in a subtly insidious tone:

"Well, the future might be unknown to me, but one thing is certain. Very soon, there will be a war for the throne of humanity. Anvil, Ki Song… maybe even that third one. They will clash, and knowing Changing Star, she will insert herself into that clash, somehow. To slaughter them."

He shrugged.

"So, why not make sure that when the dust settles, she is the one sitting on the throne? That is my plan. To hand her the crown. No matter how I feel about Changing Star, I absolutely despise those three ghouls… not to mention that I absolutely do not trust them to keep me alive. So, there's that."

Cassie remained silent, facing him with a frown on her delicate face.

Eventually, she turned away.

"...Time is short. The moon will disappear soon, so we must hurry to leave. I'll be waiting for our meeting next month."

A crooked grin twisted Sunny's lips.

"As you wish, Saint Cassia."

He rose, ready to activate Shadow Step, but then stopped.

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then coughed and asked awkwardly:

"Oh… about that Memory you wanted to commission… I am really quite good at making those, you know?"

Cassie tilted her head in confusion, then blinked.

"Right… the Memory. Of course. I'll send someone to you in a couple of weeks, with all the details."

She took a step forward, coming practically face-to-face with Sunny, then placed her hands on his shoulders.

"Pleasure doing business with you, Master Sunless."

He coughed.

"Ah, yes. Likewise. But…why are you holding me?"

Cassie remained silent for a few moments, then elegantly raised an eyebrow.

"...Because you need to teleport me out of this terrible place? You weren't thinking of leaving me here, were you? I hope not..."

Chapter-1661: Missing Light

In the courtyard of the Nameless Temple, a lonely figure was sitting on the black marble plates, shrouded in shadows. It was a young man with alabaster skin and onyx eyes, clad in an intricate suit of fearsome armor. His hair was long, and darker than a raven's wing.

In front of him, a frail tree was growing in the darkness, its branches brimming with wilting leaves.

Sunny studied the tree and sighed.

'It's not doing well, despite my efforts.'

The tree was missing sunlight — what little of it there was in the outskirts of NQSC, from where Sunny had stolen it. But it was resilient, just like the people there were. It had clung to life for a long time in that godforsaken place, and now it continued to do so here, in Godgrave.

Sunny felt guilty towards the tree.

It was the one he had cut two lines into to mark the passing of his parents. After claiming the Nameless Temple and coming back to the waking world, Sunny visited NQSC and took the tree away from the pitiful park where it grew. Of course, he replaced it with a different one — people of the outskirts did not have a lot of vibrant things to look at, and he didn't want to rob them of another one.

Not that it mattered too much. Most of the settlers who chose to pass through the Dream Gates were not citizens, but those who had been discarded by humanity and hoped to find a better place for themselves in a different world. As a result, the outskirts of NQSC were much less crowded than they had been in his time, and would only grow more desolate as time went on.

In any case, the familiar tree stood in the courtyard of his Citadel now, and Sunny often came to tend to it, or gaze at it as he contemplated various matters.

'It seems that Valor and Song have started preparations. It won't be long now.'

He sighed, then closed his eyes and dove into his Soul Sea.

Such a simple thing, but it had taken Sunny more than a year to find a way back into the Soul Sea after being banished from the Nightmare Spell. Even then, he could only enter it after concentrating and meditating for a long time. At least for a while — he could do it on a moment's notice once again after another year of practice.

The Soul Sea looked the same as it had before.

But also entirely different.

The vast expanse of silent water was the same. The six lightless suns hanging above it were also no different.

However, now, a magnificent black temple stood in the middle of the lake, its pillars shrouded in darkness. It was a perfect replica of the Nameless Temple, which had appeared here on its own the moment Sunny claimed ownership of the ancient Citadel.

The legion of shadows, which had dwelled at the edges of the Soul Sea, were now gathered around the temple, just as lifeless and motionless as they had always been… of course, there were much more of them now, with several giant figures towering above the rest.

It almost looked as if they would come to life at any moment, ready to enter the temple to worship its master.

Sunny did not know what, exactly, had caused this change, but suspected that the Soul Seas of all Saints were somewhat different from those of lesser Awakened. A Soul Sea was the representation of one's soul, after all, and Transcendence was all about the soul surpassing the limits of its mortal vessel.

As such, he couldn't help but wonder what the Soul Sea of a

Sovereign would look like. What about a Sacred being? Or a Divine one?

Would the soul of a deity contain an actual realm?

He didn't know, yet… but maybe one day he would find out.

In any case, for now, he had come here for a purpose.

Sitting on the steps of the dark temple, Sunny sighed and summoned the images of his Shadows. Soon, five figures appeared in front of him.

Saint, Serpent, Nightmare, Fiend, and Mimic.

He studied them silently.

There was more than one thing he had to discover anew after losing the helpful guidance of the Spell. Entering the Soul Sea was one, but nurturing his Shadows was another.

Only after being left alone had Sunny learned clearly where his Aspect ended and the Nightmare Spell began. Creating Shadows was a facet of his Aspect… making them stronger by feeding them Memories, however, was a helpful tool the Spell had graciously provided, building it around his innate powers.

It was reasonable, in hindsight. Memories were born from the Spell, after all, so it wouldn't make sense for Shadow Creatures to be dependent on them for growth. The same could be said about Echoes, which were similarly of the Spell — it wouldn't make much sense if the only way to create a Shadow was through an Echo.

So, Sunny had to discover a new way — the true way — to accomplish both of these things.

He had succeeded only partially.

Sunny still had no idea how to create a Shadow without an Echo, but he had discovered ways to empower most of his Shadows.

Fiend was the easiest to deal with, in that regard. All he needed was

to devour powerful creatures or potent mystical materials to grow. Granted, his stomach was truly bottomless. The rascal had been feasting on all kinds of dreadful Nightmare Creatures for many years, but only advanced to the Supreme Rank recently, after consuming that Great Demon some days back.

All of his Attributes and Abilities had grown stronger, but Fiend had not gained any new ones yet.

The secret to Serpent's growth was also rather simple, since that Shadow had always been unique. Its Rank depended on how well Sunny had mastered Shadow Dance, while its Class was equal to that of its master. Sunny could not receive Aspect Legacy Relics anymore… however, he could still advance in his mastery of it. When that happened, Serpent would become Supreme as well.

Granted, he was wary of diving deeper into Shadow Dance due to losing his True Name.

Meanwhile, Nightmare… had already become a Transcendent Terror, reaching the same Class and Rank as Serpent. It had taken Sunny a long time to figure out how to make this Shadow of his stronger in the absence of the Nightmare Spell, but the solution was simple.

Nightmare fed on the dreams of powerful creatures. He subjugated them, but could also consume them. That was how it could reach a higher Rank, even though the process was slow and fraught with danger.

The way for the Marvelous Mimic to grow was also not that hard. It could produce soul coins by devouring living beings. Those soul coins could be used by anyone to strengthen their soul — but if fed back to the Mimic, they would strengthen it instead.

However, Sunny did not really need Mimic to rise in Rank, for now. The most important traits of the Marvelous Mimic — the volume of its dimensional storage and the intricacy of the shape it could assume — depended on the potency of its master's soul, not the Shadow's own.

And finally… there was Saint.

Looking at her, Sunny sighed.

She was the only one he didn't know how to nurture, yet. In the past, Saint grew in Rank by consuming Memories with the help of the Spell, but now, there was no way he knew of to strengthen her. As a result, his very first Shadow had remained a Transcendent Devil to this day.

Of course, as far as Transcendent Devils went, she was by far the most deadly one he had ever seen.

'But is it enough for what is to come?'

Sunny didn't know.

Hearing someone walk across the marble floor of the dark courtyard, he dismissed the images of his Shadows and left the Soul Sea.

It seemed that he had a visitor.

Chapter-1662: Bridge Builders

Sunny opened his eyes and summoned the helmet of the Onyx Mantle, hiding his face. Its visor was not as ferocious and eerie as Weaver's Mask, but it was also fearsome. Deep shadows dwelled in the crack of the visor, hiding his eyes, and the black plume of the onyx helmet moved slightly in the wind.

A moment later, the darkness of the courtyard was dispelled by soft light.

Sunny did not move, waiting for Nephis to approach. Of course, he was observing her through the shadows.

A dull pain suddenly pressed on his heart.

'...She has changed.'

The source of light was Nephis herself, a ball of white flame dancing on her palm. He remembered that she had used a few Memories to produce fire and light in the past, after returning from her Second Nightmare… to spare herself the pain of calling upon her Aspect. But now, it seemed, that was not the case.

She reached him and remained silent for a few moments, looking at the frail tree with a slight frown. Soon enough, her gaze grew a little confused, and then cleared.

"Is that… a mundane tree?"

Sunny nodded.

"Indeed. I'm... afraid it is not doing well here, in the Dream Realm. Away from warmth and light."

He had tried many ways to substitute both through sorcery, of

course, with little success.

Nephis remained silent for a moment.

"The Aspect of one of my people, Shakti, has to do with nurturing plants. I can ask her to take a look."

He turned his head slightly, staring at her with his own pair of eyes.

"That would be appreciated."

She smiled faintly and looked at the wilting leaves.

"I must admit, though, I never imagined someone like you would feel sentimental about a tree, Lord Shadow."

Sunny tilted his head.

"Someone like me?"

Nephis nodded.

"Someone who chooses to live alone in the middle of a lifeless Death Zone, battling hungry abominations."

He stared at her for a few moments, then shrugged.

"This is the only tree in this lifeless Death Zone that has never tried to eat me. Of course, I am sentimental."

With that, he rose to his feet and asked in a cold tone:

"You are ready, then?"

Now that the two of them had reached initial agreement, she had to go back to Bastion and report it to the elders of Clan Valor. However, Nephis and the Fire Keepers were not going to repeat the long and perilous journey across Godgrave — instead, it was much more convenient for them to place their anchors in the Nameless Temple.

Once they returned to their tethered location in the waking world, another Saint would bring them to Bastion. And once they were done in Bastion, Nephis would bring them back to the waking world. From

there, all of them could return to their anchors in the Nameless Temple.

The process was somewhat unwieldy, but effective…

If Sunny allowed them to anchor themselves in the Nameless Temple, of course.

But he had not.

The Fire Keepers believed that it was because he didn't trust them yet. Nephis most likely suspected that he didn't want another Saint, and anyone sworn to a Domain, to contaminate his Citadel with Anvil's authority.

The truth of the matter was that he simply didn't want to give Valor easy access to his temple. The harder it was for them to reach it, the less they would bother him.

So, instead of allowing the Fire Keepers to place their anchors here, he would play the role of the ferryman himself. He would deliver them to the waking world, and then meet them there at an agreed-upon time to carry them back.

This way, Sunny would be the only one who controlled access to his Citadel — and, therefore, Godgrave.

Before Nephis and the Fire Keepers left, however, they wanted to discuss the general points of their alliance with him. The better they knew what to expect, the more detailed the offer they would be able to bring back from Bastion.

"Let's go."

Soon, the two of them entered the main hall of the temple from one of the side passages. The Fire Keepers were already there, along with their annoying lanterns.

Sunny sighed behind the visor of his helmet.

'Ah… it was so dark and peaceful here before…'

Apart from those brief few days last year when a handful of scared Sleepers resided in the Nameless Temple, his life here was rather peaceful.

It wasn't going to be peaceful much longer.

Sunny moved a hand, and the shadows rose from the floor, forming a detailed terrain map of the known part of the Dream Realm. The Fire Keepers stared at it for a few moments, then coughed and put the paper map they had brought away.

Sunny approached the dark map and stared at it for a few moments.

The Hollow mountains rose like sharp fangs from the marble floor. Far to the south, a black castle stood in the middle of a black lake. A great bridge connected a tall peak to a formidable volcano, with a beautiful black palace perched at one of its ends. Below it all, a black ship drifted in a sea of darkness. Many lesser Citadels were scattered here and there.

He was looking at something else, though. A black skeleton with its head resting on the outskirts of the Hollow Mountains.

Nephis studied the map, as well, then let out a barely audible sigh.

Finally, she said in an even tone:

"The war between the Sword Domain and the Song Domain is inevitable. There is no connection between the two over land, and the House of Night is clinging to its neutrality despite the desperate attempts by both Great Clans to forge an alliance with them. Which means… that a land bridge must be created, and will be created"

She pointed to the black skeleton.

"That land bridge is Godgrave. The Great Clan that conquers it first will have the ability to launch an invasion into the territory of the enemy. Even if a full invasion is impossible due to how well-fortified the enemy is, the side controlling Godgrave can harass the adversary, disrupt supply chains, conquer weaker Citadels, and strengthen their Domain while weakening the other."

Nephis looked at Sunny.

"So, Lord Shadow… you must understand what it means."

He remained silent for a few moments, then said with cold indifference:

"It means that neither side can allow the enemy to take Godgrave. So, this Death Zone will not be a land bridge to start the war, but instead the battlefield where the war will be fought."

And therefore… his peaceful life was as good as over.

Chapter-1663: Domain War

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, staring at the map. Then, a hollow chuckle resounded from the depths of his black helmet, sounding a little sinister in the darkness that shrouded the silent hall of the temple.

"Fighting a war in Godgrave… what a brazen act of madness. Ah, but I did not expect anything less from the Great Clans."

The Fire Keepers glanced at each other, sensing a hint of contempt in his cold voice. Eventually, one of them said stiffly:

"...We are representing one of the Great Clans too, you know. Lord Shadow."

Sunny simply turned his head, staring at him. The Fire Keeper trembled under his gaze, looking away from the impenetrable darkness nestling in the visor of the onyx helmet. It was as if there was no person inside the fearsome black armor at all.

Nephis, however, only seemed curious. She looked at him and asked, her voice even:

"You have a relationship with the Great Clans?"

Well, of course she was curious. Logically speaking, a Saint like Sunny could not have appeared without brushing sides with at least one of the great Legacy clans. It was much more likely that he had served either Valor, Song, or Night directly in the past. He was independent now, and seemed to harbor resentment toward the Great Clans… anyone would be curious to know the reason.

Sunny shrugged.

"A relationship? I guess. Although it might be called a one-sided

relationship by some."

He turned his gaze back to the map and made the shadows move. The mountains crumbled, the sea of darkness vanished, and the black skeleton grew larger, reaching the size of an average human. Everything else disappeared, leaving only Godgrave and its vicinity in sight.

"So, how will the war start?"

Nephis remained silent for a moment, then turned to the map, as well.

"Clan Song is already building a road to the Right Hand. They will use it to scale the skeleton and establish a fortress on its right shoulder. Valor is also moving its forces, aiming for the Left Hand. They will be delayed a little by the need to build a bridge."

The left arm of the colossal corpse was broken, a vast distance separating the ulna and radius from the humerus. There was a significant difference in height, as well, so construction of the bridge would take some time.

Nephis continued:

"In the end, though, it doesn't matter. There will be a fortress established on the left shoulder of the giant, and its ribcage will become a warzone. Of course, fighting under the open sky… is dangerous. But the Hollows are not something the soldiers of either of the clans can handle. At least not in the initial stage of the war."

Sunny tilted his head.

"The initial stage?"

She nodded calmly, studying the black skeleton with intense focus.

"Yes. The initial stage will be about slowly conquering territory and positional warfare. Godgrave is a Death Zone, so claiming it won't be easy. But its fall is inevitable, because that is the will of the Sovereigns. The armies will advance, sealing cracks in the bone to cut off the Nightmare Creatures from spawning on the surface."

Nephis paused for moment.

"The army of the Sword Domain will hold an advantage during that stage… firstly, because it has more experience in waging war against the Dream Realm. Secondly, because several Saints who are uniquely suited for the task serve the King. Like Sky Tide…"

Sunny frowned behind the visor of his helmet. Saint Tyris commanded wind and storm clouds… her Aspect would indeed be invaluable in Godgrave, where the veil of clouds stood between all living things and complete annihilation.

That would undoubtedly make her a target.

Already knowing the answer, he nevertheless asked:

"When will the initial stage end?"

Nephis glanced at him somberly:

"Once enough of Godgrave is taken for both armies to locate and conquer a Citadel. The second stage will be about conquering more of them. And the last stage will be about pushing the devastated enemy off the skeleton and claiming it entirely."

Followed by a period of consolidation and an inevitable invasion into the weakened enemy Domain, no doubt.

The Fire Keepers were strangely silent. They seemed to have known that a war was coming… however, perhaps it was their first time hearing someone talk about the inevitable so openly.

Nephis lingered for a moment.

"Do you understand why conquering that first Citadel is so important, Lord Shadow?"

Sunny's mood suddenly plummeted.

"I do."

It was because the moment one of the armies took a Citadel… the

Domain of their Sovereign would enter Godgrave, as well. And that would allow that Sovereign to exert their full power in a vast area around the Citadel. Once that happened, the previously unapproachable Hollows would not be that impossible to traverse, and the nature of the war would change.

The more of these strongholds were conquered, the wider the Domains would spread, eventually swallowing all of this region.

Then, it wouldn't be just Awakened, Ascended, and Saints spilling blood on the ancient bones…

Anvil and Ki Song could very well clash directly, splitting the heavens and shattering the earth.

Sunny felt a hint of dread and smiled darkly, excited by that half-forgotten feeling.

Nephis seemed to have noticed that the shadows drowning the great hall moved slightly. She shook her head.

"So, Lord Shadow… you must understand that maintaining the neutrality of your temple will be hard. Possessing a Citadel at the very start of the war is too great of an advantage. No matter what else my elders might desire, they'll be most passionate about this point."

Sunny laughed.

"Oh? No… actually, I think it won't be hard at all."

He tilted his head a little.

"No matter how greedy they are to have my Citadel, they are much more wary of seeing it fall into the enemy's hands. So, if they don't want to agree to my suggestions… why, I can just go and offer my services to Song. The Queen's daughters might prove to be more accommodating than your elders. Oh, and they are also very easy on the eye…"

One of the Fire Keepers coughed, prompting Sunny to wonder if there was something wrong with his lungs.

Nephis tilted her head and stared at him, most likely considering the blatant threat.

After contemplating for a while, she asked:

"And I'm not?"

Sunny froze.

"What?"

Nephis had a look of contemplation.

"You said that Ki Song's daughters might be more accommodating and are easy on the eye, alluding to the fact that both of these factors are advantages Clan Song has over Valor. But I am also King Anvil's daughter. Meaning… that I'm at a disadvantage, in that regard. Are you hinting that Clan Valor should make more concessions in the negotiations, due to my poor looks?"

Now, Sunny felt that there was something wrong with his lungs. Desperately suppressing a cough, he tried hard to present a cold and aloof front.

'Damnation… is she having one of her moments?! No, she must be teasing me... right?!'

When he spoke, his voice was slightly dull:

"...No. Your beauty is radiant and blinding, Lady Nephis. I wouldn't dare."

She looked at him for a few moments, then smiled:

"Really? It's good, then… oh, but if you prefer, I can ask the elders to send Morgan here, next time..."

Chapter-1664: Search and Rescue

Sunny was internally cursing himself for deciding not to wear Weaver's Mask today.

…Someone else was cursing him, as well.

The Fire Keepers were keeping their voices down, but they underestimated the hearing of a Saint.

"That guy… who does he think he is, critiquing our lady's appearance?"

"Says the man who hides his face behind a mask!"

"He must be as ugly as a toad! Frivolous! And shallow!"

He gritted his teeth behind the visor of the onyx helmet.

'What toad?! What the hell is a toad?! My face is so handsome that it can fund an entire business, you good-for-nothings!'

What did these fools know?!

Outwardly, though, he remained cold and detached.

Even if it took some effort.

"Having a secure base in an otherwise deadly region is already enough of a boon. If Valor wants to claim my temple, they can come and conquer it. Or rather… they can try."

The last words sounded especially sinister. His tone didn't change, but it sounded exceedingly threatening all of a sudden.

Nephis kept silent for a bit, then shrugged.

"I see. Do you know of any other Citadels in Godgrave, then? Advance knowledge of their locations can be just as important."

Sunny glanced at the black skeleton.

"...There are none on the surface. There are a few in the Hollows, though. I've seen a couple from afar. As for the sea of ash, even I am not brave enough to descend there."

She seemed interested in what he had said.

"You've explored the Hollows?"

Sunny nodded.

"Somewhat… but not extensively. It is a deadly place."

The Fire Keepers paled. If even a Saint who lived in a literal Death Zone called a place deadly, then it had to be worse than hell.

Nephis lingered for a while.

Eventually, she nodded.

"I think I know enough to make a report to the elders. It's time for us to return…"

Before she could finish the sentence, though, there was a loud noise. Fiend shifted slightly, the infernal flames igniting brighter in his eyes. At the same time, a tall and graceful figure appeared at the entrance of the temple.

It was Saint.

However… right now, her dark elegance was nowhere to be seen.

That was because she was carrying something on her shoulder. That "something" was resisting and cursing desperately, powerless against the Shadow's stone grip.

"L—let me go, abomination! If you want to kill me, just do it quick!

W—why are you tormenting me?!"

Sunny blinked.

'...Human language?'

Why was there someone cursing in human language here, in Godgrave?

Nephis and the Fire Keepers were similarly stunned.

Saint walked toward them and unceremoniously dumped her burden on the floor. The person rolled on the marble tiles and scrambled to their knees, crawling back in fear.

"S—stay back, demon!"

It was a very young, and very dirty youth, his face smeared in mud and dried blood. He wore a torn armor that seemed to be a Dormant Memory, his body riddled with deep lesions.

A moment later, the back of his head crashed into Neph's knees.

He froze for a moment, and then slowly looked up, his eyes widening in terror.

Then, an expression of utter shock appeared on his childish face. It was as if the young man's brain temporarily ceased all function.

"Uh…"

He blinked.

"S… s… Saint Nephis?"

She stared at him silently. The young man looked at her, then at the Fire Keepers, then at Sunny. Finally, his gaze was pulled back to Neph's beautiful face.

His cheeks blushed uncontrollably.

"W—what are you… am I dead? Is this paradise?"

She tilted her head a little, then said neutrally:

"This is the Dream Realm. Are you a Sleeper?"

Sunny had already guessed that the dirty teenager was a Sleeper. Last year, he had discovered a handful after the winter solstice and sent them to Song. This year, though, he had not found anyone in the vicinity of his territory. He had assumed that either all of them perished in other parts of Godgrave, or the Spell did not send anyone here this time around, to begin with.

Sunny was unclear on what motive the Spell had to send Sleepers to Godgrave, really. They had absolutely no chance to survive here… the last batch had only lived because of him.

But then again, it might have been precisely because of his presence that the Spell threw them here. It was a bit strange, to imagine that he was powerful enough to be a factor in the decisions made by the Spell.

In any case…

The young man gulped.

"A Sleeper? Yes, I am… wait, you are Saint Nephis! Changing Star of the Immortal Flame! Lady Nephis! What… what are you doing here?!"

He paused for a moment, then added shyly:

"...And where is here? Are we close to Bastion?"

She kneeled in front of him and gently placed her hands on his shoulders. A soft radiance enveloped them, spreading into the Sleeper's body. The wounds covering it started to heal, and an expression of deep relief instantly appeared on his face.

The Sleeper stared at Nephis with wide eyes.

His eyes were full of stars.

Sunny shifted slightly.

'What is that bastard staring at, with that expression?'

But then, he had to mentally slap himself. Was he really feeling jealous of a poor Sleeper?

Nephis spoke in a tone that was considered soft, for her:

"We are in a distant and extremely dangerous region of the Dream Realm. My warriors and I are here on an important mission. You are fortunate to have met us, young man… otherwise, I'm afraid your fate would have been sealed."

The young Sleeper remained silent, looking at her with a strange expression.

Sunny sighed.

"I did not think that any of the Sleepers survived this year. Last solstice, I happened on a few and helped them escape. There seems to be just one survivor this time."

His voice sounded cold and uncaring.

Nephis spared him a glance, then turned back to the young man.

"Don't worry. The worst is behind you. You are safe now… we will take you back to the waking world."

He took a shallow breath, closed his eyes for a moment… then desperately shook his head.

"N—no! No, you mustn't! I'm… I'm not the only one! There are others, as well… we hid ourselves and clung to life for many days, but then, there was no more water. Someone had to go out to try and find help, and I volunteered…"

Sunny sighed behind his helmet, already knowing what was about to come.

The Sleeper grabbed Neph's arm and said hoarsely:

"Please, Lady Nephis! You… you are Changing Star. Please save the

others!"

Sunny was indignant.

'The Spell… it has some nerve!'

First, it had abandoned him. Now, it was using him as a babysitter for unfortunate Sleepers.

He shook his head slightly, then asked, his voice grim:

"Those others you mentioned. Where are they?"

Chapter-1665: Alone in the Dark

As it turned out, there were two other Sleepers somewhere out there, hiding under the roots of a dead tree in the Hollows. They were well outside the Shadow Realm's Fragment and inside the bones of the colossal skeleton, which made the potential rescue… problematic.

In fact, it was miraculous that they had survived for so long.

Too miraculous, maybe.

While the Fire Keepers were calming the dirty teenager and giving him food, Sunny stared at him coldly. He had already studied the Sleeper's soul, making sure that he was indeed a Dormant human. But why were Nephis and her people so careless?

He glanced at her, then asked, his voice emotionless:

"How do you know that he's not one of Skinwalker's vessels?"

Nephis, who was standing a few steps away from the Sleeper, shrugged:

"If he was an abomination, my flames would have burned him, not healed him."

Sunny raised an eyebrow. It made sense… her soul was immune to Corruption, so the flames of her soul did not tolerate it. Granted, Nephis had not yet mastered that aspect of her powers to such a degree in the past.

'Alright, he's not Skinwalker.'

That didn't mean that the Sleeper was harmless, though. He could still be a body Mordret decided to wear… granted, that was very improbable. It would be exceedingly hard to find a Sleeper just a few

days after the winter solstice, let alone drag one to Godgrave. And while Mordret was powerful, it would be harder still to traverse Godgrave in a Dormant body, even for him.

So why was this Sleeper so strange?

Sunny walked forward, and although he did not say anything, the Fire Keepers instinctively parted before him. The Sleeper looked up, his eyes suddenly widening in fear.

"Uh… m—my lord…"

Stopping in front of the teenager, Sunny looked down without saying a word.

'How strange.'

Even though he could see the dirty young man, he could not sense him. It was as though there was no one there — there was no scent, no presence, not even a shadow he could perceive.

Was that why he had not sensed what Saint was carrying until she was already in the temple?

The corner of his mouth twisted upward.

"Is that your Aspect?"

The Sleeper flinched, then looked down.

"Y—yes, my lord… I am not good at anything except for hiding. But hiding… I'm really good at it."

Sunny tilted his head.

'What a powerful Aspect.'

It wasn't easy for a Dormant Ability to fool the senses of a Saint. Perhaps it wasn't completely unreasonable for the Spell to send this poor child here…

In any case, that Aspect of his could somewhat explain how the

Sleeper managed to survive a short trip across Godgrave.

"What is your name?"

The young man shivered.

"It's… it's Ray, my lord."

Sunny lingered for a bit, then nodded.

"Alright. I've decided not to kill you, Dreamer Ray."

Leaving the young man with his mouth hanging open, Sunny walked away. As he did, the Fire Keepers gave him a few dirty looks and returned to trying to calm the teenager down.

Their previous efforts had been utterly invalidated by a few words from the Lord of Shadows.

Nephis glanced at him and raised an eyebrow.

"Do you kill Sleepers often, Lord Shadow?"

Sunny contemplated for a few moments, trying to remember how many Sleepers he had killed. In the end, he answered evenly:

"Not often."

Then, he turned to face her and asked in the same emotionless tone:

"What about you, Lady Nephis?"

She did not answer, instead changing the topic to the fate of young Ray's friends.

"You are better acquainted with Godgrave. The two of us and my warriors… can we rescue the other two Sleepers from the Hollows? That is not the mission entrusted to me by Clan Valor, but still. If it is possible, I would like to save them."

Sunny hesitated for a second.

"Can we? Sure, it's possible. But your people… skilled as they are,

there is no guarantee that all of them — or any of them — will survive in the Hollows. You and I can try it alone, though."

She nodded simply.

"Then that is what we'll do. If you are willing."

He stared at her silently, pretending to be surprised.

"Are you fond of risking your life for strangers, Lady Nephis? Braving a Death Zone for a couple of insignificant Sleepers… wouldn't it be a shame if someone as illustrious as you perished for no good reason? Why do it?"

She smiled faintly.

"Firstly… I'm not planning on dying here. Call me arrogant, if you wish. Secondly, aren't you being a little hypocritical, Lord Shadow? No one forced you to rescue the Sleepers last year, and yet you did. Not only that, but you even escorted them all the way to the territory of Clan Song. So, please forgive me… but I know that you are not as heartless as you want to appear behind that mask."

'Am I, really?'

Sunny frowned, deciding to act more tyrannical in the future.

She turned and looked at him, her smile widening a little.

"And most importantly… because I want to. That's the only reason I need."

Sunny let out a chuckle.

'Ah, there it is. She doesn't change.'

He shook his head:

"What if all of this is an ingenious plot to lure you into the Hollows, alone, where I'll have an easier time disposing of you? What if I've already struck a deal with Clan Song? Aren't you afraid of following me into the darkness, with no one to cover your back?"

Nephis remained silent for a bit, then shrugged nonchalantly.

"Shouldn't you be afraid of following me into the darkness instead? This Citadel of yours is very valuable. What if I already received orders from Clan Valor to eliminate you and make it my own?"

Sunny stared at her for a bit, then let out a cold laugh.

"Now that you mention it, I probably should be afraid. But, what a pity. I've been foolishly fearless as of late."

There was a sinister note in his tone, as if he was inviting her to try something.

Nephis smiled.

"Being enslaved by fear is more foolish."

With that, she threw one last glance at the Sleeper. Her expression changed subtly, switching from composed languidness to a state of cold focus.

"It might be for the better… I'll instruct my people to tend to your tree while we're gone. That said, time is of the essence. I suspect that these three Sleepers only lasted that long because of this young man's Aspect. He volunteered to venture out of their hiding spot thinking that he's the best person for the job, but the remaining two might be in danger without him.

If they are still alive, we must find them as soon as possible."

Sunny nodded.

"Fair point. Go talk to your people and find out what else they've learned from the boy. We'll leave as soon as that is done."

While Nephis talked to the Fire Keepers, he lingered for a while, observing her.

His mood was rotten.

'Damn it… I didn't want to reveal what is hidden in the Hollows to

her, so soon…'

Chapter-1666: Wandering Temple

After getting all the information the frightened Sleeper could share, Sunny and Nephis let him rest. Without wasting any time, Nephis headed for the exit from the temple… however, Sunny led her into its depths instead.

Soon, they reached a set of stairs and descended underground.

The Nameless Temple was larger than it seemed from outside, because it had a vast basement level. In fact, it was almost a perfect copy of the grandiose upper level, with its own great hall, auxiliary rooms, and inner sanctum.

There were a few differences, of course. For one, there was no altar in the underground temple. There was no path to the courtyard, either. Instead, a towering gate was cut into the marble wall, covered by intricate engravings.

When Sunny and Nephis reached the underground hall, it was bathed in impenetrable darkness. Even the radiant light of the flames burning on her palm could not dispel it… Sunny didn't want anyone to see what was hidden there, yet, and so, he shrouded everything in the deepest of shadows.

And for a good reason.

As Sunny had found out after conquering the Nameless Temple, all Citadels had something special about them. Some special qualities were minor, while some could do truly stunning things.

Sunny called them Components.

He was not sure if these Components were innate to the ancient

strongholds or something added to each by the Spell, like the Gateways were. Perhaps it simply built upon what was already there, strengthening existing traits and making them easily accessible by humans.

However, what Sunny did know was that only a Saint that bound the Citadel to their soul could command it, making use of the Components. The Spell made the process easier for them, most likely… as for Sunny, he had to sort everything out himself.

Luckily, it had not been too hard.

As far as he could tell, the Nameless Temple possessed two Components, both of them rather powerful as far as Citadels went — not on the level of the Great Citadels or the Ivory Tower, of course, but far more prominent compared to lesser ones, like the Sanctuary of Noctis.

The first Component of the Nameless Temple was rather straightforward. It was the invisible Guardian. The creature, unseen and imperceptible, had been killing anyone and anything that tried to enter the temple — before Sunny showed up, that was, walking across ancient bones. He suspected that it allowed him to pass because of his Attribute, the [Flame of Divinity].

Just like it had allowed him to enter the temple in his First Nightmare because his soul carried the [Mark of Divinity].

…Indeed, his Citadel was the very temple he had once used to sacrifice himself to the gods. Back then, Sunny had assumed that it was a temple of Shadow God, but now, he thought differently.

After all, the timing did not make sense. At the time when the slave caravan perished while trying to cross the mountains, the imperial soldiers were actively destroying shrines and monasteries of the Shadow God. And yet, the stygian edifice of the grand temple looked like it had been laying in ruins for countless years back then, already.

And then there were the words the Spell had spoken when he coughed up blood on the black altar. It did not say that he had offered himself as a sacrifice to Shadow God… instead, it said that he

had offered himself as a sacrifice to all the gods. Shadow was just the only one who had listened.

So, now, Sunny suspected that the Nameless Temple was much more ancient than almost anything else he had seen in the Dream Realm. If he was correct, it had been built at the dawn of time, during the early days of the Age of Gods, and was meant to worship the entire pantheon… including the seventh god, who had not yet been erased from existence and forgotten.

Perhaps that was why this temple, and all the other temples built for the Pantheon of Seven, had been abandoned and lost. They had been forgotten, just like Dream God had been forgotten.

As such, the Nameless Temple could as well have been the temple of the Forgotten God.

Perhaps it had always been, having been built by some heretics who worshiped the lost deity despite the will of the remaining gods.

Whatever the case, the Nameless Temple had already been empty for thousands of years during Sunny's First Nightmare, which took place at the very end of the Golden Age, just before the fleeting Age of Daemons came to doom the world to destruction.

In his First Nightmare, it stood on the peak of a black mountain, desolate and forsaken. The only creature who ever visited it was the Mountain King, who seemed to have possessed a spark of divinity in its soul, as well.

And yet, now, the Nameless Temple was somehow here in Godgrave.

The reason for this discrepancy... was the second Component of the Nameless Temple.

Out there, in the darkness of the underground hall, a vast mystical circle was carved into the wall opposite the towering gate. It was not comprised of runes, or elements of any other type of sorcery Sunny could recognize. The only thing he could think of that resembled the enchantment of the Nameless Temple were the knives Sun God had created alongside the Chain Lords...

Perhaps it was divine sorcery, which followed no rules and bent the world to its will simply by virtue of existing. In that case, he wasn't sure that "sorcery" was the right word to describe it. A miracle fit such a feat much more.

In any case, that mystical circle was the heart of the enchantment that allowed his Citadel to wander freely across realms.

As long as the master of the Citadel flooded the ancient temple with an ocean of essence, it could vanish from one location and appear miraculously somewhere else.

That was how Sunny had put his Citadel in the very heart of Godgrave. He suspected that it had been wandering the realms long before being made into a Citadel by the Nightmare Spell, as well. The wandering temple had not been built on the peak of that dark mountain, but instead appeared there one day, already in ruin.

Sunny did not want anyone to know that his Citadel could travel, yet. He would only be able to share this secret with Nephis once she trusted him enough to keep that information from the King of Swords.

And so, they walked through the darkness until they reached the great gate. Nephis did not say anything, allowing Sunny to pull the heavy gate open.

Behind it… was a smooth surface of white bone.

At first glance, it seemed that the gate did not lead anywhere except a dead end. However, there was actually a narrow crack in the ancient bone, just wide enough for a person to pass.

The fissure was just as dark as the interior of the underground hall, and the wind blowing through it brought with it a sweet smell of rotting leaves.

Nephis frowned.

"That fracture… leads all the way to the Hollows?"

Sunny nodded.

"Indeed."

She hesitated for a moment.

"Won't your Citadel be invaded from below, then?"

He walked toward the dark fissure and turned slightly to fit through.

"It won't… you'll see."

Not satisfied with his answer but unwilling to ask further, Nephis sighed and followed him into the damp darkness.

Chapter-1667: Disarmed

Following the Lord of Shadows, Nephis was descending into the depths of Godgrave. The fissure was narrow and twisting, permeated with the sweet smell of rotten leaves. At times, she had to sidestep to push forward, the polished metal of her breastplate scraping against the white bone.

Her taciturn guide was calm and indomitable, seemingly unconcerned about entering the Hollows. She was calm, as well — the part of her that would have been wary had been swallowed by the pain.

A ball of white flames was dancing on the palm of her gauntlet, illuminating the path ahead.

She was used to that pain.

Bathed in the white radiance but drowning in darkness, the Lord of Shadows seemed especially mysterious now that they were alone. Clad in the fearsome onyx armor, with his face hidden behind the visor of a black helmet, he looked more like a powerful Nightmare Creature than a human being…

Cassie had not been able to glean any information about the master of the dark temple. If not for the fact that the three powerful creatures serving him were Transcendent, and not Corrupted, Nephis would have entertained the thought that he was an abomination.

There were other reasons why she did not, as well.

Neither of them spoke for a long time. Eventually, though, the earthy smell grew stronger, and the Lord of Shadows halted.

A warm wind blew past them in the direction of the Citadel.

He remained motionless for a few moments, then turned to face her. The visor of his helmet was full of impenetrable darkness, and his even voice was aloof:

"I have a request, Lady Nephis."

She met his dark gaze and raised an eyebrow.

The darkness in the visor stirred slightly.

"Dismiss your weapon before we proceed."

Nephis was surprised. She tilted her head slightly, then asked in a calm tone:

"You want me to enter the Hollows without a sword?"

The onyx helmet moved slowly from side to side.

"You can have a sword. Just not this sword."

She hesitated for a few moments.

That strange request… was loaded with meaning. The sword Nephis used, Kinslayer, was a Transcendent Memory of the Seventh Tier. Much more importantly, it was a very special weapon. Not only was its durability equal to that of a Supreme Memory, but it had also been altered by the King of Swords himself.

Which made it connected to him… just like everyone who wielded the blades forged by Anvil were connected to him, and to each other — albeit in a different manner.

So, what the Lord of Shadows wanted was to be left truly alone with her, without the possibility of her adopted father sensing what they were doing.

Suddenly, Nephis felt a bit… embarrassed?

'That didn't sound quite right, did it?'

Her heart sped up a little.

Was it because of his mocking threats to kill her in the Hollows? Luring her into the darkness and asking her to disarm...

She stared at the Shadow Saint for several seconds, then unhurriedly dismissed both her sword and its sheath. Left unarmed, she continued to stare at him with a calm expression.

His hand rose and brushed against the darkness, slowly pulling a weapon out of it… just like he had done before their duel. This time, however, it was not an odachi. Instead, it was an elegant longsword, both its hilt and blade perfectly black.

Nephis received the longsword from the Lord of Shadows and weighed it briefly in her hand, then struck the flat of its blade lightly, watching it vibrate to determine the center of percussion. She was surprised once again — the sword was perfectly balanced and indistinguishable from one forged from real steel, sitting comfortably in her grip.

As if made to suit her personal preferences to the smallest detail.

'What a convenient Ability.'

It had to be an Aspect Ability. She studied the shadow sword for a few moments, then lowered it and summoned the Nameless Sun — a Memory she had received for killing the Crimson Terror of the Forgotten Shore. The Nameless Sun was a weapon-type Memory, but of a unique kind. Instead of manifesting as a weapon, it imbued other weapons, enhancing them.

The sword handed to her by the Lord of Shadows was not a Memory, and therefore could not be augmented by the Crown of Dawn. The Nameless Sun, however, could.

Nephis nodded.

"We can continue."

Her guide turned away indifferently and continued walking into the depths of the narrow passage. She followed, contemplating…

'What are his motives?'

The Lord of Shadows had let his disdain for the Great Clans be known. Now, he requested that she dismiss her sword, hinting that he wanted to keep something secret from the King.

Something moved in her heart, surprising her… a sweet, but distant longing.

'Can he be an... ally?'

It would be so nice, to have someone to rely on.

In the past four years… no, for as long as Nephis could really remember, after her grandmother's passing, she had been on her own. Carrying a crushing burden without anyone there to lend her a hand. There were people who supported her, sure — the Fire Keepers, Effie and Kai, and a few others.

But they were not as powerful as she was, and so could not really lessen her burden. The only exception was Cassie — without her quiet strength and friendship, Nephis might have collapsed a long time ago. But Cassie, too, was her subordinate. And, therefore, her responsibility.

Yes, that burden was something Nephis had chosen to carry herself. And yes, it was her own unreasonable ambition that was the cause of everything... most of it, at least. And yet, sometimes, she couldn't help but feel suffocated by the depth and intensity of her own desire, surrounded by enemies and laying awake at night, unable to sleep.

Nephis was a human, too. She felt weak sometimes, too… even if she tried her hardest not to show it, as well as many other things she felt.

So, if there was really someone out there who was as immensely strong as the Lord of Shadows seemed to be and shared her hatred toward the Sovereigns, someone she could rely on to stand side by side with her in the face of danger…

Ah, it was a thought as sweet as it was dangerous.

She wasn't even entirely sure that the Lord of Shadows was a human, let alone that he could be trusted. And yet, for some reason, unexplainably... she found herself really wanting to.

'Why do I feel this way? It's not like me...'

If they could really become allies...

'Forget about it.'

Following the aloof Saint into the darkness, Nephis frowned slightly.

In this world, she could only really rely on herself. Everyone else would either betray her, abandon her, or stay by her side and perish as a result.

From her childhood and to this day, that had always been the truth.

And that was alright. She did not need anyone, because she alone was enough. Her will was enough, her strength was enough, and her scorching longing was enough.

It was plenty.

'It's strange.'

It would have been wonderful if she really had an ally… a partner, even. But she didn't, and had never.

And yet, and yet…

Strangely enough, the Lord of Shadows gave her a sense of unexplainable familiarity. Because of it, trusting him — and in him — was oddly easy.

Nephis was wary of that ease.

'Maybe that is one of his Aspect Abilities, too…'

Chapter-1668: Hollow Bones

Sunny pushed his body through the last stretch of the narrow fissure and suddenly found himself in a vast open space. He took a step to the side, clinging to the porous surface of the ancient bone, and allowed Nephis to follow him onto a treacherous ledge.

She couldn't see because everything was still shrouded in impenetrable darkness, but below them… a whole hidden world was stretching as far as the eye could see, full of vibrant life.

They were currently inside the breastbone of the dead deity, which was comparable in size to a modest continent. Just like the rest of the bones, it was hollow, encompassing a realm of its own. The bone marrow that had once filled the vast expanse of the sternum's interior was long gone.

And in its place, a dreadful jungle had grown.

The humid air was filled with an indescribable mixture of strong scents. Below them, an impenetrable canopy of countless trees was swaying like a vermilion sea, most of them alien and monstrous, with vibrant red leaves. Primordial ferns towered like blooming towers, with vines and wild bushes rising between the craggy trunks like walls. Bloodred moss covered everything like a soft carpet.

Sunny could not really see colors in the darkness, but he knew enough to guess. Outside the Fragment of the Shadow Realm, the jungle shone with its own pale light, so he had seen its true appearance.

Here and there, colossal pillars of abominable flora rose to the dome of the sternum, attached to the cracks on its surface — those were the tendrils the jungle had extended to reach the sky. It used them to drink diffused sunlight when the clouds hid the sun, regrowing them every time they were incinerated.

…And, of course, there were all kinds of vile things dwelling under the canopy of the subterranean jungle.

Hordes of powerful abominations lived here — Corrupted, Great, and even Cursed. Some of them were enormous and grotesque, some so small that it was hard to notice them with a naked eye.

All had been baptized by the dire need to be born and grow on the surface, and only those lucky and vicious enough to reach maturity could descend into the Hollows and hope to survive here, away from the merciless gaze of the incinerating heavens.

The dark jungle was utterly deadly, and most deaths one could find here were utterly horrid.

That was the place where Sunny had brought Nephis after being apart from her for four long years.

'Not… exactly romantic.'

He sighed secretly, then turned his head to look at her.

Nephis seemed unperturbed by the darkness, the scent of the jungle, and the indescribable choir of rustling noises that washed over them. There was a calm expression on her beautiful face, her slender body was relaxed, and the point of the sword he had given her was aimed at the ground.

The white flame dancing on her palm reflected in the depths of her calm grey eyes.

For a moment, Sunny thought that there was a shadow of some sharp emotion in those eyes, but then, it was gone, replaced by her usual reserved composure.

"How far are we from the ground?"

He hesitated for a moment.

"It's better to summon a Memory. There is a bit of a fall."

She nodded, and then, her alabaster skin ignited with a soft radiance

for a short moment.

Sunny had expected Nephis to summon the familiar translucent cloak, but instead, a pair of beautiful white wings wove themselves from the light behind her. Nephis gripped the hilt of her sword and then took a step into the emptiness, gliding down with bewitching grace.

As she descended toward the jungle, the ball of flame burning in her hand was like a lonesome falling star.

He sighed, and then followed her down. As Sunny fell, his figure rippled and turned into a black crow, its feathers indistinguishable from the surrounding darkness.

Nephis descended into the jungle like a spirit of light, illuminating the twisting trunks of ancient trees and the red moss growing on them. Her wings fluttered once, sending a powerful gust of wind into the depths of the forest, and then disappeared with a soft rustle.

Sunny landed behind her, assumed his human form, and stared at her for a couple moments.

His thoughts were in disarray.

'Beautiful… too damn beautiful.'

He couldn't even imagine how that poor Sleeper must have felt, being rescued from the depths of despair, embraced, and healed by someone so breathtaking. A beautiful spirit of heavenly grace who had somehow found him in the depths of hell.

Well, it certainly beat being rescued by a sinister demon of darkness like Sunny.

'Lucky bastard.'

Making a mental note to keep Dreamer Ray away from the women in his life — gods knew Sunny had been burned for saving a Sleeper before! — Sunny walked forward and gestured for Nephis to follow.

She did, keeping silent for a while.

Eventually, though, Nephis asked:

"Should we be so careless?"

Sunny had not made any attempts to proceed with caution, walking forward with wide strides. It was a far cry from how someone should have been acting in a Death Zone, and especially one as vicious and vile as the great hollows inside the bones of the dead god. It was understandable that Nephis was confused by his attitude, strolling through the deadly jungle as if he owned the place.

But he did... in a sense.

Sunny shook his head.

"We are safe, for now."

As soon as his voice was swallowed by the noises of the jungle, though, they heard a different sound.

A deep, hoarse, heavy hiss of something giant breathing.

Nephis raised her sword, ready to strike.

But there was no need to.

A moment later, the trees in front of them parted, revealing a small clearing. On it, a hideous creature was laying on the carpet of moss and rotten leaves.

Its body was like a hill of scorched flesh, with terrifying muscles bulging under a rotting black hide. It was vaguely humanoid in shape, but the huge head of the Nightmare Creature resembled that of a jackal, the slightly parted jaws vast enough to swallow a whole building. The towering fangs glistened with a golden sheen, and behind them, a black tongue was hidden, covered in sores and scars.

A Great Monster.

Strangely enough, the abomination was not moving. Its giant eyes were closed, while its breathing was deep and sedate. There was no sign that it had sensed them.

Nephis stared at the monstrous being for a while, then glanced at Sunny. He was treated to a rare sight… there was a hint of doubt on her fair face.

"It's… asleep?"

He glanced at the Nightmare Creature, then nodded.

"Of course, it's asleep."

Not paying the Great Monster any attention, Sunny walked past it with cold indifference.

"...I'm the one who put it to sleep, after all."

Chapter-1669: Questions in the Light

Sunny walked deeper into the jungle, allowing his shadow sense to permeate the rustling darkness. Originally, this place was like a nearly impenetrable barrier, with thick vines and dense undergrowth barring one's path. Not only was the flora plentiful and terribly dense, but it was also predatory and lethally dangerous — even for a Saint.

But now, the abominable plants were still and docile. There were paths cut through the jungle, as well, even if no one except for Sunny himself would have noticed them. As such, he managed to maintain considerable speed, getting further away from the Nameless Temple with each minute. They had to hurry to maximize the chances of finding the two Sleepers alive.

As the two of them traversed the jungle, they encountered more sleeping Nightmare Creatures. There were hundreds of them, if not thousands, many of the Great Rank. Walking among the slumbering horde of abominations must have been a tense experience for Nephis, considering that the power sleeping under the Nameless Temple was truly dreadful.

Perhaps even a Sovereign would have been given pause after witnessing it.

Sunny was calm, though.

All of these Nightmare Creatures were in the thrall of the Dream Curse, lost in Nightmare's lesser dream domain. Their souls were locked in a maze of nightmares, unable to escape… for the most part.

Exceptions happened, albeit rarely.

The Dream Curse was silent and insidious. It had slowly infected every abomination in a wide area around the Nameless Temple, and because of how subtle the spreading plague was, very few of them had noticed anything amiss before it was too late. Lulled to sleep, they became trapped in nightmares.

Those who had been able to resist the Dream Curse were disposed of by Sunny, a Great Demon being the last of the abominations he hunted down. The rest were now at Nightmare's mercy. If they died in his domain, their souls would feed the Shadow, pushing the tenebrous stallion closer to Supremacy. But if they continued to live, their dreams would strengthen his legion of horrors.

Of course, there was a possibility that an especially ferocious abomination could destroy all of his nightmares, like Sunny had done in the Kingdom of Hope… but the chances of something like that happening were low.

Not only were Nightmare Creatures less resolute than Sunny had been, but the current Nightmare was also much more powerful than he had been all that time ago. The weaker of his horrors were being destroyed, but the stronger ones slowly took their place.

As for the dark destrier himself, he was currently busy with a very important and sensitive task.

After a while, Nephis suddenly spoke:

"Would you mind sharing how you put all these abominations to sleep?"

Sunny smiled behind the visor of his helmet, suddenly remembering their first meeting on the Forgotten Shore.

He kept silent for a few moment, then answered neutrally:

"I would not, if you shared something as well."

Nephis simply nodded.

"That seems fair."

Sunny contemplated the answer, then spoke simply:

"There is another Transcendent Terror serving me. His powers have to do with dreams… and nightmares. It took a long time to lull the inhabitants of this corner of the jungle to slumber, but it couldn't be helped. My Citadel would have never been safe if there was a constant source of danger underneath it. Now, I only have to worry about the enemies coming from outside my territory."

Nephis let out a sigh.

"I must admit. I am… a bit envious. My luck with Echoes has never been great."

It seemed that way, but actually, if she stopped giving all the Echoes she had earned to her companions and followers, the situation would have been different.

Of course, Sunny possessed a unique advantage — unlike Echoes, his Shadows could grow and evolve to higher Ranks. Otherwise, his retinue would not have been anywhere near as powerful as it was now.

He lingered for a few moments, then said, his voice even:

"My turn to ask, then."

Sunny considered his words carefully.

"I've heard that you are an enlightened master of combat, Lady Nephis. A warrior who understands battle better than anyone else. So, as a master… if you had no other choice, how would you fight a Supreme?"

Nephis smiled faintly.

"I'll assume that it is a hypothetical question."

She lingered for a while, then answered casually:

"There are numerous ways to fight against a superior enemy, of course. Deception, manipulation, misdirection — all the usual tricks

apply. Leveraging your advantages while making sure that the adversary is at a disadvantage. But, honestly… I wouldn't trust in complicated schemes and ingenious strategies when facing a Supreme."

Nephis fell silent for a moment and said, her voice devoid of any particular emotion:

"At the end of the day, the best way to fight a Sovereign… is to be a Sovereign."

Sunny chuckled.

'Interesting…'

It wasn't exactly what he had expected to hear. Nephis was currently in the middle of a grandiose and risky scheme, after all — infiltrating a Great Clan to take down its ruler. And yet, she was disparaging such an approach, saying that the best way to kill a Supreme was to first become a Supreme.

Was she having doubts about her plan?

Or preparing to execute a different one altogether? No, that was impossible… she would never be allowed to challenge the Fourth Nightmare, let alone return from it and live.

The jungle swallowed his quiet laughter, and in the ensuing silence, Nephis asked:

"What about you, Lord Shadow? How would you fight a Supreme?"

He thought for a bit, then shrugged nonchalantly.

"Me? Simple, really… I would probably wait until the two of them clashed, watch one die and the other become weakened, and then stab the one who survived in the back."

Nephis tilted her head slightly. When she spoke, her voice sounded a little amused:

"Are you very confident in your backstabbing skill, Lord Shadow?"

Sunny smiled behind the onyx visor.

"Pretty confident, I guess. None of those I stabbed in the back ever complained."

Well, because they were dead.

The corner of her lips curled upward.

The two of them remained silent for a while.

Eventually, Sunny said:

"I have another question."

He guided them to a barely noticeable path. The white radiance of Neph's flames was stark as it chased the darkness away… the darkness retreated, but not far, revealing the vibrant vermilion moss and the red vines growing on the twisted trunks of ancient trees. As soon as the two of them passed, the darkness returned, swallowing everything anew.

Sunny sighed.

"Do you know the legend of Odysseus?"

Nephis seemed surprised by his question.

"Sure. Why?"

He spoke without turning his head, his cold voice remaining emotionless and even:

"Odysseus has been gone from his home for twenty years. Everyone thought him dead, and many suitors arrived to propose marriage to his widow. She refused them for a while, but they insisted that she must make a choice. One of them was meant for the throne of Ithaca."

Sunny paused for a moment, then continued:

"Eventually, Odysseus came back and infiltrated the gathering of the

suitors disguised as a beggar. Bringing himself into the very home where his enemies dwelled. None of them recognized him, assuming that he was weak and posed no threat. They were wrong."

The jungle rustled around them as his voice turned a little sinister:

"Odysseus then ruthlessly massacred the suitors, not sparing a single one. Not only that, but he even viciously killed the maids who had been deemed disloyal. A river of blood was spilled on that day, and scores of people lost their lives, their bodies sliced and mutilated. So, my question is…"

He stopped and turned, facing Nephis and her pure white flames.

"...Isn't Odysseus too cruel?"

She looked at him for a while, her beautiful grey eyes filled with dancing flames.

Eventually, Nephis said in her usual calm tone:

"You've never hated anyone, have you, Lord Shadow? It seems to me… that you are a very kind man."

He laughed.

"That is a first. I've been called many things before, but kind… I don't think I've ever heard this one."

He turned away and continued walking deeper into the jungle.

"You are wrong, by the way. I know hatred, too. I am a very hateful person, in fact…"

Granted, his hatred was probably not as scorching as hers.

Chapter-1670: Welcome to the Jungle

The Fragment of the Shadow Realm was vast, its darkness drowning not only the surface of the dead god's sternum, but also swallowing a considerable stretch of the abominable jungle thriving in its hollow depths. The Dream Curse had lulled the Nightmare Creatures populating the area to sleep, so it was relatively safe.

Sunny and Nephis moved with sufficient speed, reaching the edges of the Fragment in a matter of hours. They could have been much faster, of course, but he used that time to teach her about the dangers of what lay beyond.

"The jungle is hidden from the gaze of the sky, but it is much more dangerous than the surface. The Nightmare Creatures of Godgrave are all born on the surface, yet only those who are strong enough to survive there descend into the Hollows. Here, they can exist indefinitely… in theory. In practice, they are all cannibals.

The competition for water and nourishment is fierce, so the inhabitants of the jungle constantly fight and devour each other."

Nightmare Creatures were known to battle among themselves — it was only in the presence of humans that they united to destroy the uncorrupted first. It was much worse in the Hollows, though, where every abomination was of a type that had to satisfy its hunger often. Life and death came swiftly, and only the most vicious ones lasted for a while.

His tone remained indifferent.

"Only the strongest and most fierce abominations get to descend into the jungle, and only the most ferocious of them get to survive here. It's a boiling pot of horror, where appalling monsters endlessly fight

against each other, and only the most dreadful of them gets to live.

As a result, the average power of a Nightmare Creature from the Hollows is truly daunting, and has been constantly growing for centuries."

Nephis sighed behind him.

"Doesn't it remind you of something?"

Sunny shrugged.

"It's a bit like a demented, accelerated version of evolution, I guess."

She looked at a sleeping abomination nearby, a contemplative expression on her face.

"...I was thinking that they are just like us."

He remained silent for a moment.

"I'm not sure I follow."

Nephis looked away from the Nightmare Creature and used her sword to slice apart a thick vine that barred her path. Her voice sounded a bit wistful:

"The Spell sends human youths into the First Nightmare, and only those who are strong enough get to return. Then, it tosses them into the Dream Realm, where they need to constantly fight for survival. To grow stronger, they need to consume Nightmare Creatures… or each other. So, we humans aren't that different from the abominations of Godgrave."

Sunny smiled darkly. The parallel was indeed there, it was just that the pace of human advancement was magnitudes faster than that of the Nightmare Creatures here in the Hollows. What had taken the abominations thousands of years could very well be accomplished by humanity in less than a century.

The Spell was cruel, but effective.

He shrugged.

"In any case, this jungle is teeming with Great Nightmare Creatures. There are Cursed ones here, as well — I'll do my best to help us avoid them today. There are some Corrupted abominations too. These ones are too weak to contend against the stronger creatures, so they have developed many vile survival strategies."

His face twisted behind the onyx visor.

"Many are tiny and aim to burrow into your flesh. Most are venomous. Some lure their prey into a helpless state with mind attacks or illusions. Pretty much all of them are great masters of disguise, blending in with the jungle. Try to rely on your hearing more than you do on your sight… and if we encounter a swarm of vermin, don't hesitate to burn them all to ash."

Sunny's own most glaring weakness was that he did not possess means of dealing potent damage over a large area. So, he was vulnerable to vast swarms of tiny parasites. In that sense, having Nephis with him was a boon — her ability to control incinerating flames covered for his weakness.

They had always made a good pair in battle.

He smiled quietly.

"Everything I mentioned can be applied to the plants here, as well. This abominable jungle is just as predatory as the Nightmare Creatures populating it. So, be wary of things that seem like they can't move, too."

Nephis remained silent for a while, then said, her tone slightly amused:

"I see that you've chosen a lovely place to live, Lord Shadow. A bit deadly, though."

He chuckled.

"Don't you live in Bastion, Lady Nephis? That place is far more deadly, I think."

She didn't answer, perhaps expressing agreement.

Slowly, the impenetrable darkness around them receded. They were approaching the boundary of the Fragment.

Not long after that, the true appearance of the subterranean jungle finally revealed itself.

Sunny and Nephis stopped, looking at the wild expanse of vibrant forest in front of them.

The Hollows were mostly dark, but there were towering pillars of light falling from above here and there — those were the cracks in the dome of the ancient sternum. Currently, each was connected to the jungle by colossal tendrils of vines, moss, and vermilion growth, each functioning like a twisted sky bridge.

When it rained on the surface, great waterfalls fell from the cracks, washing over the jungle and causing devastating flash floods.

When the veil of clouds was torn, the vertical bridges ignited in a grandiose conflagration and turned to ash, which rained on the jungle and fertilized its soil.

The cracks in the bone weren't the only source of light in the Hollows, either. The jungle itself glowed with dim crimson light, many iridescent plants growing in the damp darkness. They were feeding on diffused sunlight through the vines extended to the surface, and then slowly released it, emanating light and heat.

The sight of it all was alien, eerie, and frightening.

But also darkly breathtaking.

Letting out a quiet sigh, Nephis dismissed her flames and studied the jungle for a few moments. Then, she closed her eyes and listened to it.

Eventually, she said:

"I don't think we'll make it in time if we proceed on foot. Should we fly?"

Sunny glanced at her and hesitated for a moment.

"I'm not that great at aerial combat… at the moment. Flying will be much faster, yes. But also much more dangerous."

Nephis thought it over, then nodded calmly.

"Then, let's fly…"

Chapter-1671: Fear the Sun

According to what the Sleeper had told them, his two friends were not very far from Sunny's territory — however, they were well beyond the reach of his Shadow Sense.

It had taken the youth two days of wandering to stumble upon the Fragment of the Shadow Realm, where he was picked up by Saint. The only reason he had survived such a journey across Godgrave was because Nephis and her people had burned away most of the Nightmare Creatures on the surface, clearing a path to the vicinity of the Nightmare Temple.

Sunny could traverse the distance a Sleeper could walk in two days in a couple steps, but using Shadow Step in such a manner was bound to consume a vast amount of essence, especially if he had to bring Nephis with him.

Transporting her and two more humans all the way back was out of the question — unless he wanted to find himself severely weakened in the middle of a Death Zone, not to mention sabotaging his other two avatars.

In short, he would rather move in a less wasteful manner.

Flying suited him fine.

As Nephis was summoning her beautiful wings, Sunny extended his shadow sense outward. He was cautious about exploring the abominable jungle — there were many Nightmare Creatures here who could feel his gaze, and were not shy about gazing back.

Soon, his expression darkened.

"We will proceed slowly."

The white wings appeared in a gust of wind. Illuminated by a soft radiance, Nephis raised her hands to tie her silver hair up. Stopping what she was doing, she raised an eyebrow and glanced at him, slightly confused.

"Haven't we decided to fly in order to save time?"

Sunny stared at her for a couple of moments, then slowly looked away.

"...Yes, but if something truly powerful notices us, we'll be stalled. Maybe even forced to escape. So, we will traverse a dozen kilometers or so at a time. I'll scout for danger when we stop."

He pointed to one of the vine bridges stretching toward the dome of the Hollows.

"Head there first."

Nephis remained motionless for a few moments, then nodded and bent her knees slightly. Then, she jumped powerfully, raising a gust of hurricane wind with one flap of her wings.

Sunny dissolved into the shadows and followed her as a black crow.

The two of them soared above the dense canopy of red leaves and flew swiftly to the distant pillar of vines. As they did, countless gazes followed their flight.

'Not good…'

A vast swarm of appalling creatures suddenly rose from the jungle, moving to intercept them like a buzzing cloud. Each abomination resembled a mosquito, if mosquitoes were the size of dogs and had glistening bellies full of rotten blood.

Sunny let out a resentful caw.

'Am I going to have to summon Serpent?'

Before he made a decision, however, Neph's black sword suddenly ignited with blinding white radiance. She swung it in the direction of

the approaching swarm, causing a single radiant spark to glide above the jungle, seemingly carried by the wind.

A moment later, the white spark suddenly blazed, and a hurricane of flame was born from it, enveloping the swarm. Burning abominations fell down like a rain of white fire, disappearing into the damp vermilion canopy. Those that had not been immolated slowed down, trembling.

Nephis was shining with a pure white radiance. Flying above the jungle, she was like a small sun… and if there was one thing that the Nightmare Creatures of Godgrave feared universally, it was the sun.

A moment later, those abominations that had avoided the initial conflagration were swallowed by the flame, as well. Just like that, the swarm was eradicated.

Sunny observed the scene incredulously.

'...Damn.'

How convenient!

Sunny had a lot of ways to deal with abominable giants and ferocious beasts. But these misbegotten pests had caused him so much grief in the past year… now, he didn't even have to move a talon when they appeared. Hugging Changing Star's thigh was so great!

Those Fire Keepers were living the life…

A minute or two later, they reached the vine bridge. Neph's sword lashed out once again, this time without being augmented by her flames. Nevertheless, the decapitated body of a hideous primate monster plummeted down, crashing into the jungle with a thunderous noise a dozen seconds later.

Nephis landed on a thick stalk of a red vine, using the vambrace of her armor to clear the wall of the living pillar of poisonous thorns. Then, she thrust her gauntlet into the moss to find a handhold. Half-standing and half-hanging above the abyssal drop, she observed the jungle, her eyes calm and focused.

Sunny, in his crow form, landed on her shoulder. Nephis glanced at him briefly, but did not say anything.

He extended his shadow sense forward once more, sensing several truly powerful adversaries hiding under the thick canopy not too far away from their position.

One was already ascending the sky bridge, hidden from sight by the mess of red leaves.

The best way to proceed would be…

He jumped off Neph's shoulder and glided forward, taking a smooth turn to the right after a couple of seconds. She followed.

Just like that, they hopped between pillars of vegetation, not spending more than a few minutes in the air each time. There were other abominations that attacked them in the process — swarms of weaker ones, and truly harrowing creatures as well.

The strongest of them was a Great Monster shaped like a crimson python, who had been pretending to be a part of the vine bridge. The creature's disguise was so thorough that Sunny did not notice it at all… Nephis, however, did. Not only that, but she also knew its exact Rank, Class, and Attributes, making the battle much easier.

Cassie must have been helping her from all the way in Bastion.

In the end, Sunny used Shadow Manifestation to immobilize the gargantuan python, while she severed its head with several merciless strikes of her sword. The battle was short, but fierce — it was so intense, in fact, that the commotion attracted the attention of other, much more dangerous beings.

Luckily, Sunny and Nephis escaped before other abominations reached the corpse of the great python and clashed for the right to devour its massive body, making the jungle quake.

Despite the fact that the two of them had not met in four years, and that she did not even remember him…

Their cooperation was as seamless and comfortable as it had been

before. They moved like two parts of a single whole without having to say or signal anything to each other, raining death upon their enemies.

Sunny had missed that feeling.

All in all... he had never had such an easy time traveling across the Hollows.

Before too long, they reached the approximate area that the Sleeper had described. The pillar of vines he had used to climb to the surface, at least, was the correct one. Now, they had to find the dead tree under which the other two youths were hiding.

If they were still alive, of course.

'Curse it.'

Sunny's mood turned somber when he saw what lay beyond the towering pillar.

Out there, below them, swallowed by the jungle almost entirely…

Was a vast ruin.

Chapter-1672: All That Remains

Sunny assumed his human form, standing on a twisting stalk of a giant vine side by side with Nephis. Sunlight was streaming from above, illuminating her slender figure… his, however, was hidden in the deep shadows, almost imperceptible. If someone gazed upon them right now, it would have seemed as though she was observing the overgrown ruin alone.

The ruin was vast and sprawling, but most of it was swallowed by the jungle. Only a few crumbling stone edifices rose above the canopy, covered in red moss. It was hard to recognize them as man-made structures, but the Awakened were experts on all things having to do with ruins — the Dream Realm was littered with them, after all.

Nephis tilted her head a little.

"Ruins? I didn't know that humans once lived here, in Godgrave."

Sunny remained silent for a few moments.

"...Godgrave was densely populated once, in fact. There was a fairly advanced civilization thriving here. The surface was just as deadly, and I can't say anything about the sea of ash below. But there are many ruined cities in the Hollows, some of them as large as the lesser population centers in the waking world."

She glanced in his direction, seeing only the darkness.

"I didn't know that you have such a keen interest in ancient civilizations, Lord Shadow."

He smiled.

"Those who forget the past are doomed to repeat it in the future."

His words vaguely hinted at a double meaning, but he didn't say anything else.

In any case, Nephis was right. Sunny did indeed have a keen interest in ancient civilizations — he always had, even back in the Dark City. Solving the mysteries of the past appealed to some hidden part of his heart. The thrill and charm of exploring forgotten ruins was the closest thing Sunny had to a hobby… maybe, in a perfect world, it would have been one of his life's passions.

However, his interest in the ruins of Godgrave was special.

The dead civilizations of the Dream Realm had always been one and the same for him — the people were different, the histories were different, but they all belonged in the pages of the same book. After meeting Wind Flower in the Tomb of Ariel, though, Sunny learned that there were two entirely different kinds of ruins in the Dream Realm.

One kind belonged to the people who had lived in the mortal realms, and were destroyed by the war between the gods and the daemons, as well as its immediate outcome.

The other kind belonged to those who had lived in the five divine realms, and fell under the tide of Corruption later.

The difference between the two was very important…

The latter civilizations had been infected by the Nightmare Spell before their eventual fall. Just like the people of the Waking World — the sixth divine realm — were.

The ruins in Godgrave belonged to the second kind.

Because Godgrave had once been a divine realm.

If Sunny was correct, then this harrowing place was what remained of the Sun God's world after it had been swallowed by the Dream Realm. The immolating white void hidden behind the veil of clouds, the sea of ash below… it had to be the broken realm of the Lord of Light.

If so, then the people of this realm must have survived the conclusion of the Doom War. The gods were dead, the nightmares of the Forgotten God were slowly devouring the scattered lands, the Dream Realm was being born. But here, a thriving civilization survived and persisted, building populous cities in the bones of the colossal skeleton.

He could only imagine how strange and vibrant this civilization had been, with vast cities rising in the glowing jungle, great waterfalls pouring from above to create swift rivers that would disappear without a trace a few days later.

The vast sternum must have been the heartland of that civilization, with satellite kingdoms rising inside the ribs, and most remote cities being built in the arm and leg bones of the dead deity.

But then… the Nightmare Spell had descended. And just like the people of the Twilight Sea, the inhabitants of Godgrave failed to meet its dire challenge, being swallowed by the flood of Nightmare Gates.

Now, they were gone. Even the memory of them was gone. The world they had called home was now part of the Dream Realm.

All that remained were these overgrown ruins.

Both Sunny and Nephis looked at them with the same emotion, even if they both hid it.

…Would their world be swallowed like this one, too? Would their people disappear like these people had, one day soon?

Sunny sighed and sent his shadow sense into the ruin.

After a while, his expression turned grim.

Sensing that the shadows around her grew darker, Nephis shifted and asked, her tone a little somber:

"Are they dead?"

He shook his head slowly.

"I have a piece of good news and a piece of bad news, Lady Nephis."

He paused for a moment, then added with cold indifference:

"The good news is that the two Sleepers are still there, in the ruins."

She looked at him with a frown:

"What is the bad news, then?"

Sunny took a step out of the shadows, bright sunlight reflecting from the surface of his onyx armor. The crack of his visor, though, still brimmed with impenetrable darkness.

"...They aren't the only ones there."

'How the hell did that boy survive?'

Out there, hidden in the canopy of the jungle below them, numerous shadows were moving slowly, each belonging to a powerful Nightmare Creature. He had never seen or sensed abominations like these before, but simply from the depths of their shadows, he knew that they were powerful.

And there were… a lot of them.

"These Sleepers must have found the deadliest nest of Nightmare Creatures in the area to use as a hiding spot. Their luck… well, I don't even know if it's amazing or utterly terrible. They won't survive for much longer, but having survived for that long is already a miracle."

She nodded calmly.

"So we fight, then."

Sunny stared at her for a few moments.

"Or… we grab them and run."

Nephis shook her head.

"I don't think that will be possible."

He frowned, not knowing what she meant.

A few moments later, though, he understood.

The bright light falling on them from high above suddenly grew many times brighter, becoming almost blinding.

'The clouds…'

And a split second later, the great pillar of vines they were standing on shuddered, the upper part of it turning to ash.

As the tendrils that the subterranean jungle had extended toward the surface all moved and started to fall, torrents of flames spreading swiftly toward their roots, Nephis jumped off the stalk and dashed forward, toward the ruins…

And away from sunlight.

"Don't dally!"

Cursing silently, Sunny jumped after her, this time neglecting to turn into a small crow. Instead, he turned himself as light as he could and glided on the wind, descending in a somewhat controlled fall.

He sighed heavily, and then grinned, his eyes glinting with excitement.

'I guess that means that we are going to fight…'

Chapter-1673: Entering the Ruins

The Lord of Shadows broke through the canopy and disappeared in the jungle, landing noiselessly in the ruins. Nephis folded her wings and fell toward the sea of red leaves to follow him.

A moment later, she landed in a small clearing. The vermilion moss softened her landing, but she could feel the solidness of stone under her feet. There were crumbling structures all around her, most swallowed entirely by the vines and creeper plants.

Some of the plants glowed beautifully, dispelling the deep darkness — the ruin of the ancient city was suffused with light, shadows, and ethereal twilight.

The glowing plants emanated heat, as well, so the humid air under the impenetrable canopy of rust-red leaves was suffocating and sweltering. Nephis inhaled deeply, her alabaster skin glistening with moisture.

'It's hot…'

The ground shook as the great pillars of vines crashed into the jungle, wreathed in flame, and sent clouds of burning debris flying in all directions. Ash fell down like snow.

A few fiery meteors landed in the ruin, as well, starting small fires here and there.

Nephis dismissed her wings and closed her eyes for a moment, listening to the jungle. Far away, there was a cacophony of indescribable sounds — the Nightmare Creatures populating this vibrant hell were on the move, incited to frenzy by the destruction of the sky bridges.

But here in the ruins, everything was relatively quiet. The jungle rustled and whispered with a thousand voices, but its tone was no different from how it had been before.

Which was… bad.

It meant that Nightmare Creatures did not dare come here and challenge the masters of this place.

She opened her eyes and glanced at the Lord of Shadows, who seemed to possess an Attribute or an Ability that allowed him to sense many things from afar.

It was impossible to tell his expression, of course, because the mysterious man never revealed his face. His figure, however, was just as cold and aloof as ever. He didn't seem concerned, and, strangely enough, that calmed Nephis as well.

"How close are we to the Sleepers?"

His tone was indifferent, competing with her own as far as inexpressiveness went:

"A few kilometers."

She stared at him silently for a few moments.

'Do I… sound this way too, by chance?'

Emotionless, aloof, and deadpan. Kind of… haughty.

She coughed.

It was not that she did not have feelings. It was just that she had spent most of her formative years sheltered in solitude, so when other children learned how to use their voices and faces to express nuanced emotions in the company of their relatives and peers, she had not. Who was she supposed to express her feelings to if no one was around?

Communication was an acquired skill, as well… Nephis knew how to do all these things now, of course — she had to, as a public figure.

But her default state was still the same, reverting to how she had been in her childhood.

She frowned.

'Well, anyway…'

"What about the Nightmare Creatures?"

The Lord of Shadows raised a hand, and a graceful odachi suddenly appeared in it, its serpentine steel as dark as a moonless night. There were no swirling sparks that usually appeared when Memories were summoned, and almost no time passed before the black blade manifested itself into reality.

"Already moving in our direction."

Nephis nodded.

"No time to waste, then."

Using the longsword he had given her, she sliced a path through the vines and moved forward. The Lord of Shadows followed behind her, his steps not making any sound whatsoever. It was as if he was not there at all.

As they made their way deeper into the ruins, the jungle tried to kill them. There were plants that tried to entangle them and pull them into pits of viscous digestive fluid. Vile critters fell from above, aiming to slither under their armor. Glowing flowers swayed beautifully, sending clouds of flesh-eating pollen into the humid air…

Nephis had long summoned her helmet. When thick vines moved to imprison her, she cut them. When revolting millipedes and grotesque ticks fell on her from the branches above, she sliced them apart. When clouds of pollen, spores, and poison tried to envelop them, she uttered the Name of the wind, destroying them.

'What a terrible place.'

The Lord of Shadow simply walked behind her, not doing anything. He seemed perfectly content to use her as a pathfinder, only giving

directions when Nephis was getting off course.

"Aren't you… going to summon your Echoes?"

He answered succinctly:

"No. Do I need to?"

Nephis gritted her teeth.

Those powerful creatures under his command were protecting the Citadel. Was he worried that her Fire Keepers would come under harm without them, or that his Citadel would be harmed by the Fire Keepers without anyone keeping an eye out?

In any case, the Shadow Saint seemed to believe that just the two of them would be enough to escape these ruins alive. Nephis felt a little pleased by his vote of confidence, but also a little incensed.

For some reason.

'Morgan has a lot of Echoes, too…'

Morgan had become much stronger after Transcending. The defeat in Antarctica seemed to have tempered her character, too... and it was not as if Anvil coddled her — the opposite, in fact. And yet, there was a huge difference in how Clan Valor treated its true daughter and its adopted daughter.

Granted, Nephis suspected that the harsh treatment she received from the King of Swords was actually a sign of affection.

He had not given her any powerful Echoes, though. It was fine for Morgan to have better equipment than her... but the Lord of Shadows, too?

Just when she was considering making a remark — against her better judgment — a soft voice resounded in her mind.

[Neph…]

She was already raising her sword.

[A Great Beast is approaching. Some kind of a construct, or maybe an undead. Very strong… be careful!]

A moment later, she sensed it. Not the creature itself, but the pressure of its passing — the very mundane change in air pressure caused by something moving with incredible speed.

The mound of red moss in front of her exploded, revealing the dark interior of an ancient ruin. From it, surrounded by flying pieces of moss and shards of ancient stone, an eerie creature appeared, wielding a strange weapon.

The creature was twice as tall as Nephis, but shriveled and hunched, like a mummy. It was vaguely human in appearance, with a body made of cracked stone. Red moss grew on it like a tattered robe, and below it…

Nephis felt a sense of distaste.

There was desiccated flesh under the stone carapace, as if a human had once been imprisoned inside the golem. The stone face of the creature was featureless, except for the eyes — inside the two round holes cut on its surface, two gaping wounds where human eyes should have been nestled with darkness, and from them, two beautiful blossoms grew on black stalks.

The mace the golem held seemed to be cut from diamond. He looked like a monk who had gained enlightenment and became one with the world… with the abominable world of spreading Corruption, filled with nothing but ancient evil and chilling malice.

It only took a split second for Nephis to see all these details.

Then, the creature was upon them…

Chapter-1674: In Tandem

A Great Beast…

Killing a Great Beast could pose no trouble at all, or all the trouble in the world. Beings of that Rank were more than mere creatures — each of them possessed a mythical power, reality itself coming undone under the pressure of their existence.

When Nephis had been a Master, a single Great abomination was like a cataclysm…

Now, Nephis was a cataclysm herself.

Igniting the flames of her soul, she shone with pure radiance and met the eerie golem with the full strength of a Transcendent Titan. Pain washed over her, bringing the world into focus. Everything was stark and clear in the world of pain, ready to surrender to her will.

Except for the Lord of Shadows.

The black blade of her sword met the diamond mace of the Nightmare Creature, deflecting it and dissipating its force. An impact that would have produced a devastating shockwave was suffocated, its destructive potential disappearing without a trace.

The golem was fast — faster than Nephis. But she knew its movement well. They were lacking insight and intent, almost entirely without refinement. Because of that, the creature wasted precious moments, while she wasted none.

A split second later, the tip of her blade burrowed into the red moss, aiming to destroy one of the golem's shoulder joints.

The sword the Lord of Shadows had given her was supposed to be equal to a Transcendent weapon — and a potent one, at that. Cutting

the flesh of a Great abomination would have been hard, but not impossible. Still, Nephis did not hope to break the golem's stone carapace, and aimed at a weak point, instead.

She already knew that the creature would not be able to avoid her strike.

That was Neph's power. She could not predict the future, like Cassie could, and did not possess an Aspect Ability that would allow her to read the enemy's mind. However, she knew the laws of combat — knew them intimately, instinctually, and comprehensively. From the philosophy of combat to how the atoms interacted with each other to form a steel blade, she knew it all.

So, she did not have to see the future. Knowing the laws of combat, she could simply tell what movements her enemy could perform, was most likely to perform, and would perform in any given situation.

That was the easiest part of being a master at combat. The hard part… was actually dictating the situation to make the enemy move how she wanted them to move.

Of course, to achieve that, she had to know the enemy as well.

The shoulder joint of the eerie golem had turned out to be far more durable than she had anticipated. Her blade bypassed the stone carapace, but the desiccated flesh beneath was just as tough. Her sword bit into it and failed to cut deep, leaving only an insignificant scratch.

Nephis frowned, knowing that she was now open to the creature's retaliation.

The diamond mace rose, flying at her head with terrible speed… and was pushed aside by the odachi of the Lord of Shadows. Not only had he protected Nephis, but he also created an opening for her to deliver another strike.

This time, she aimed for the golem's eyes.

Fighting side by side with the Shadow Saint was… comfortable.

Nephis had known that he was a swordsman of exalted skill — that much was apparent from their duel. However, what had stunned her the most was how excellent he was at supporting a partner in a battle, and being supported by a partner in turn.

Too excellent, maybe.

She would have expected that such a solitary and reclusive person would have trouble cooperating with others. But actually, the opposite was true.

It was as though her shadow had really come alive, fighting by her side with effortless ease. The Lord of Shadow seemed to anticipate her every move, and was always exactly where she needed him to be, playing his role both flawlessly and with utmost effectiveness.

Even stranger still… Nephis herself was oddly attuned to his style of combat. She didn't have to put any effort into acting in unison with him, as if it was something natural.

The warriors of Valor were highly disciplined and promoted unity, often training and going into battle together. And yet, she felt more at ease in the company of this total stranger.

Perhaps that was a unique skill of a Transcendent with a high affinity to shadows — shadows never existed on their own, after all. It was their nature to be cast by someone.

Her sword plunged into the golem's eye, sinking deeply. That did not kill the Great Beast, but it did seem to slow it down a little. Just to be sure, Nephis cut the flower growing from his other eye socket, as well, wondering if the creature was actually a predatory plant.

But it was not. The flowers, it seemed, were mere decorations.

[Break the armor.]

Cassie's voice let her know where the creature's weakness lay. Living beings were relatively easy to kill, because they shared the same weaknesses — heart, brain, vascular system. But constructs and the undead were tricky, since destroying them was always a guessing game. Especially if they were powerful enough so that obliterating

them completely was out of the question.

"Aim for the breastplate!"

Nephis and the Lord of Shadows abandoned their attempts to damage the tough flesh of the abomination, concentrating instead on the cracked armor of the stone golem. She even sacrificed some of her physical augmentation to enhance the black sword instead — luckily, the manifested blade easily accepted the soul flame, igniting with a strange kind of dark radiance.

The battle lasted for a dozen seconds, and by the end of it, and entire swath of the jungle was completely overturned. Nephis and her aloof guide rained a barrage of blows on the breastplate of the Great Beast, easily avoiding its utterly devastating, but simplistic and predictable attacks.

Each of them might have had a tough time of fighting the creature alone, but together, they overpowered it without too much strain.

Soon, the ancient stone cracked even more, and then exploded in a rain of shards. The golem staggered, and toppled to the ground.

The Spell whispered into her ear, its voice mocking and insidious:

[You have slain a Great Beast, Asura of Condemnation].

[Your soul shines brighter.]

Nephis breathed heavily and dismissed her helmet, loose strands of hair sticking to her fair face. She studied the collapsed golem warily, knowing that this was just the beginning of a dreadful battle.

The Lord of Shadows had said that there were a lot of these abominations in the ruins, after all.

Her guide, meanwhile, walked closer to the stone creature, stared at it for a bit, and then gave it a kick.

Then, he said, a hint of somber emotion in his usually cold voice:

"...It's an MWP."

Nephis was surprised. She lingered for a moment, then raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

He pointed to the dead golem with the tip of his odachi:

"This creature, it's an MWP. Mobile war platform. Well… I guess it's more of a powered armor suit. Mundane soldiers used them in Antarctica."

The Lord of Shadows remained silent for a while, then sighed.

"The mummified corpse inside was an Awakened warrior, and this golem is the power suit he wore. Of course, it was powered by sorcery, not technology."

His voice slowly returned to the usual indifferent nonchalance:

"They were defenders of this city, I guess."

Chapter-1675: Uncovered

The jungle, which had been like a rustling ocean, was suddenly absolutely quiet. The dead silence that enveloped them was so utter and unnatural that, for a moment, Nephis felt a chill travel across her back despite the sweltering heat.

The horrors of the forgotten ruin were drawing closer.

She frowned slightly, and then dismissed most of her armor. A whirlwind of sparks wreathed her slender figure for a few fleeting moments, and then dissipated without a trace, leaving only a thin white tunic behind.

Free of the suffocating weight of her armor, Nephis inhaled deeply and noticed that the Lord of Shadows was staring at her intently. At least… she thought he was? The darkness nestling in the crack of his visor was just as cold and nebulous as always.

"What… are you doing?"

His voice was emotionless, but she thought she recognized a hint of emotion in it. Confusion, maybe?

Yes, he was probably confused.

She shrugged, enjoying the feeling of her skin breathing, unobstructed by the weight of metal.

"My armor won't withstand a hit from a Great Beast. I'd rather have all the speed and agility I can get, considering the circumstances. That way, I stand the chance of not being hit at all."

That was true. Her armor was a Supreme Memory of the Second Tier, but after the battle with this… asura… she had judged that it would not protect her from a blow delivered by one of the ancient golems.

She could heal her body if it was damaged, but not her armor — and once the armor was wrecked and bent out of shape, it would constrict her movements even further.

Now that the presence of the true masters of the ruined city had scared off all the pests populating the jungle, it was better to be fast and nimble.

The other reason Nephis had dismissed her armor was necessity. She was pretty sure that she would be forced to use her Transformation Ability in the upcoming battle… so, she didn't want to burn the Supreme Memory.

That armor of hers was pretty decent. It would be a shame if it melted into a puddle of molten steel, like so many previous ones…

Cassie had also told her once that it suited her well.

Not that it mattered, of course!

'What am I even thinking about?'

Nephis looked away, hiding her embarrassment at the inappropriate thought, and summoned two charms — the [Dire Warning] and the [Testament of Malice]. One possessed an enchantment that scared off creatures of a lesser Rank than her, the other added an element of insidious decay to her attacks — not too powerful, but cumulative.

Finally, she activated the enchantment of her tunic — the remaining underlayer of the dismissed Supreme armor — and sensed the air grow cool and soft around her, caressing her slightly damp skin like fine silk. That invisible barrier would not do much against sharp weapons, but it could lessen the impact of blunt ones, like the diamond mace the mindless asura had wielded.

Each Memory was enhanced by the Crown of Dawn, making the enchantments much more potent.

There were many more tools in her soul arsenal, but using them was a matter of resource allocation. Relying on Memories too much would drain her essence, which could be better spent on her Aspect and sorcery. She couldn't summon the [Altar of Denial] to lessen the

essence consumption, either, since that Memory could only be used in a static position.

Nephis had earned a truly astonishing number of Memories in the past four years, but most of them had not been worth her essence. Some had gone to the Fire Keepers, and some were sold off to fund them… even with the nominal support of Clan Valor, maintaining a Citadel and a private army of Masters was not cheap.

The more clandestine affairs, which were handled by Cassie, also demanded a lot of funding — and the Great Clan could not be allowed to learn about them.

As a result, Nephis kept only a few tried-and-tested Memories, most of them useful in different kinds of situations. She summoned as few as she could in any given battle, relying on her skill and strength instead, as much as she could.

The Lord of Shadows also did not seem like someone who relied on Memories a lot, although she wasn't sure if his reasons were the same as hers. In fact, Nephis had not seen him summon a single Memory apart from his serpentine odachi and his onyx armor… if those were even Memories. At this point, she wasn't sure.

His Abilities were truly versatile...

That manifested sword he had given her was holding up pretty well. With an Ability like that and sublime swordsmanship, who needed Memories?

She wondered what other tricks he had in store.

Just at that moment, the shadows stirred and drowned the mysterious Saint like a dark tide. She remembered the scene of a black giant rising above the bone plain and was ready to take a step back, but the scale of it seemed much smaller.

Indeed, a few moments later, a different kind of creature rose from the darkness. It was entirely black and demonic in appearance, with four mighty arms and a long tail, towering above her at at least three meters of height — just as tall as the ancient golem had been.

Its muscular body radiated a sense of chilling, ferocious physical strength and bestial potency. The stonelike armor of the Lord of Shadows shifted, covering the four-armed demon like an onyx carapace, and at the same time, his great odachi rippled like liquid, growing even longer to match the demon's towering height.

'...What a fearsome sword.'

Nephis stared at the dark demon in front of her, wondering for a moment…

Was that, perhaps, the true appearance of the Lord of Shadows, while the human form he wore was no more than a disguise?

The human, the dark colossus, the swift crow, and this shadow devil… was that the result of his Transformation Ability? If so, it was much more versatile than Nephis had assumed, and any Saint she knew possessed.

Then again, shadows were formless and shapeless by nature, so maybe such versatility made sense.

The form of a shadow demon... was very much like the enchanted armor suits the defenders of the ancient city had once worn, in a sense. Was his body encased in a shell of shadows, like theirs had been in sorcerous stone? If so, it was an ingenious applications of one's Aspect.

But it couldn't be just that. The Lord of Shadows could cover his human body in the shell of the four-armed devil and the shadow colossus. But what about the crow? It was much smaller than a human. So, the fundamental principle of his Transformation had to be different.

As she was contemplating the nuances of his Aspect, the Lord of Shadows spoke, his voice still cold and indifferent:

"We must hurry."

His voice was still the same…

Which was a little funny. A voice like that suited a young man of

noble bearing very well, but coming from the chest of such a huge and ferocious creature, it sounded a little comical.

Absurdly enough, Nephis found herself wanting to laugh.

…Of course, she did not, maintaining her usual calm expression. However, two sparks ignited in her eyes.

"Yes… right. Let us hurry."

Turning away to hide her face, she gripped the hilt of her black sword and dashed into the jungle.

Chapter-1676: Inalienable

The carnivorous plants and the abominable vermin populating the jungle had hidden away out of fear, terrified by the approach of the masters of the ancient ruin. So, Nephis ran fast, covering a great distance with each second.

The wind was cool, soothing her slender body.

The Lord of Shadows had taken the lead, his strides like that of a beast. His powerful limbs tore the ground, and from time to time, he used the trunks of the towering trees to leap forward, sending splinters flying back.

Soon enough, Nephis sensed the approach of a new enemy.

The same kind of golem broke through the wall of vines, and the ground quaked from the crushing impact of its footsteps. The creature looked just like the one they had slain a minute earlier — tall, overgrown with scarlet moss, its ancient stone carapace covered by a net of cracks.

This one was armed with a diamond scepter instead of a mace — a split second later, the scepter was already flying at the shadow demon's head.

Its speed was so dire that a fatal blow seemed inevitable. The jungle itself swayed, following the trajectory of the diamond weapon.

Nephis raised her sword to block.

A fraction of a second later, the Lord of Shadows… simply disappeared from the path of the scepter. There was a thunderous boom, and a devastating shockwave spread in a wide cone from the point where the asura's weapon had been supposed to hit.

A vast swath of the jungle, hundreds of meters across, was instantly devastated.

Sadly enough, Nephis was right in the middle of the cone of destruction. The sword she had raised cut through it, sharp and indomitable, allowing her to continue moving forward without slowing down too much.

She jumped, stepped on the diamond scepter, ran across its length, and delivered a dire downward slash — all in a matter of a single moment.

The tough stone carapace of the Great Beast did not split open, but that was not her goal. What Nephis aimed for was to infect it with the decay of the [Testament of Malice].

Before the creature could catch her, she had already jumped back, twisting gracefully midair.

The Lord of Shadows appeared from the darkness behind the creature, his enormous odachi falling down like the blade of a giant guillotine. In that demonic form, encased in fearsome onyx armor, he was no less imposing than the abominable asura. The might of his strike was so terrible that the knees of the Great Beast buckled, its feet sinking deep into the moss.

The ground itself split open.

Stone shards shot into the air like shrapnel.

"There is another one!"

Towering above the kneeling Nightmare Creature, he used two of his hands to grab its head viciously, locking it in a chokehold. His other two hands turned the black odachi downward and drove its tip into the crack infected by the decay of the [Touch of Malice].

Nephis spun and swung her sword. Up until this point, she had only used her Dormant Ability. At that moment, though, she summoned a spark of soul flame and, enduring the agony, uttered the Names of fire and wind.

That single spark exploded into a raging inferno, incinerating everything in its path. The jungle in front of her turned to ash, revealing the dreadful form of the second asura.

The abomination's charge had been broken by the shockwave of the directed explosion, and the flame stuck to its carapace, burning hot enough to melt Transcendent steel.

The stone armor of the asura held, but was softened by the terrible heat. The desiccated flesh buried within it, though, caught aflame.

Wreathed in fire, the towering Nightmare Creature rose like an infernal fiend.

'There is no time…'

Nephis used the momentary delay to lunge at the abomination being held down by the Lord of Shadows. Knowing how to destroy one, they could dispose of it with relative speed… but a Great Beast was a Great Beast.

It was already a miracle that it could be wrestled to the ground by a Saint.

Her sword blazed with brilliant radiance, absorbing the full augmentation of her titanic soul.

There was an explosion of blinding light, and the abomination's stone carapace crumbled. The joint attack of light and shadow had overcome its decaying resilience, and the perfect unity of their murderous wills had overcome its will to live.

The kneeling asura slowly fell, the diamond scepter slipping from its grip.

The second Nightmare Creature was almost upon them…

With cold darkness nestling in the crack of his visor, the Lord of Shadows growled deeply and strained his mighty body. Nephis ducked as the massive corpse of the slain asura was tossed into the air, its dire mass crashing into the burning abomination like a siege ram.

After that, they made short work of the staggered creature.

She killed the first, while the Lord of Shadows killed the second.

Three Great Beasts in just as many minutes… even for Nephis, that was a remarkable result.

But it was still not fast enough.

Without even stopping to retrieve the Supreme soul shards, the two of them rushed away. More of these terrible creatures were coming, and the survival of the two Sleepers was hanging by a thread.

As they ran, the Lord of Shadows spoke suddenly:

"This place… we might very well die here."

His voice was even and clear, as if he didn't care either way.

Nephis answered succinctly, long accustomed to feeling the cold breath of death:

"That is true."

He lingered for a moment.

"Is it really worth it, to die for a couple Sleepers?"

She jumped over a fallen tree, landed nimbly, and lunged forward with stunning speed.

"It is!"

To her, it was a strange question… but then again, people often misunderstood her. She had answered honestly, but the question itself was wrong and misguided.

Because she wasn't risking her life for these Sleepers. The Sleepers were merely a circumstance, but what she was ready to die for were her principles. She believed that saving these teenagers was the right thing to do, and so, she wanted to do it. And it was also the right thing to do because she wanted to do it.

Before, a long time ago… Nephis had been truly powerless. She watched fearfully as everything their family possessed was taken away. Their heirlooms, their wealth, their home. Even people who surrounded her were either killed or chased away one after another, disappearing without a trace.

Their absence had left a scar.

Perhaps because of that, she didn't value material possessions, and many other things that people usually held dear. The things she valued the most were inside of her, and therefore, could never be taken away.

Her beliefs, her principles, her will. As long as she held fast to that, nothing could scare her, and nothing could make her feel truly powerless.

However…

While these things could not be taken away, they could be lost. She could betray herself, and thus discard them. It was the easiest thing in the world, to lose oneself.

Then, she would truly have nothing.

The thought of that… was too appalling. Much more terrible than death.

And so, Nephis would rather die.

It didn't matter if she risked her life for two Sleepers or to fulfill her greatest desire. To her, both were one and the same — both were expressions of her self, and therefore equally important.

The Lord of Shadows laughed.

"Why?"

Hadn't she already told him that it was because she wanted to? It was simple as that... and as deeply complicated as that, as well.

She had long given up on trying to explain herself to people. But,

somehow, Nephis felt... that, maybe, the Lord of Shadows would be able to understand.

Running as fast as she could, Nephis smiled faintly.

"Because otherwise, I wouldn't be me!"

Chapter-1677: Spark of Longing

A towering golem made from crumbling stone, its cracked body overgrown with red moss, raised a hand. There was a corpse entombed within it. The soldier of an annihilated civilization had perished thousands of years ago, but their sorcerous armor still lived, infected by an abhorrent corruption.

The creature, an Asura of Condemnation, was holding a diamond cleaver in its hand. When the cleaver rose, the world seemed to tremble in fear. When the cleaver fell, reality itself seemed to split apart.

A giant tree, its adamantine bark hard enough to resist the end of days, was cut down in one slash and toppled slowly. The wind raised by its fall fanned the flames that had been spreading through the jungle, and bitter smoke permeated the air.

The tree had been dead for countless years, and its heart had long rotted away. There was a cave-like hollow between its roots, which was now revealed.

Two terrified Sleepers had been hiding in that hollow, and were now hugging each other as they looked at the sinister abominations in horror.

The diamond cleaver rose again, spelling their doom.

…Before it could fall down to reap their lives, however, an equally menacing fiend appeared from the darkness, crashing into the great golem with a ferocious growl. It had sharp claws, twisting horns, and a long tail, its bestial body encased in a fearsome onyx carapace. The darkness itself moved, shrouding it like a mantle.

And a moment later…

The eyes of the two Sleepers widened.

A beautiful young woman wearing a fluttering white tunic fell from above, surrounded by pure light. Her skin was fair and flawless, like polished alabaster, and her silver hair shone brilliantly in the dim twilight of the jungle. Her figure was slender and graceful, and her beauty… was breathtaking.

She held an incandescent sword in her hands.

Landing on the shoulder of the ghastly golem, she delivered a terrible blow and severed its damaged neck.

The headless abomination continued to resist furiously even after being decapitated, but the strange pair — the fearsome demon of darkness and the beautiful spirit of light — cooperated seamlessly, swiftly bringing it down.

The diamond cleaver shattered and fell apart. The stone carapace crumbled. The mummified corpse that had been entombed within it turned to ash.

The creature was dead before the falling tree collapsed to the ground, making the ancient ruin quake.

Nephis jumped off its corpse and inhaled slowly.

The Lord of Shadows had been wounded in that last clash, but his towering body was already repairing itself. She was unscathed… for now.

Most importantly, they made it to the two Sleepers in time.

Turning around, she walked to the remains of the giant tree and looked into the hollow space between its roots, where two ashen-faced teenagers were staring up at her with wide eyes.

Both were girls, their faces smeared with ash and dirt. One of them seemed to maintain a shred of composure, holding the other tightly. The other girl… didn't look too good, and seemed to be slowly falling unconscious.

The first Sleeper opened her mouth and said, stuttering:

"You're… y—you're… Changing Star?"

Nephis smiled in an effort to calm the girl. That calming smile was not natural to her, but she had practiced her communication skills diligently. After all, she was both a leader and a public figure now… knowing how to make the right impression was one of the skills she had to master, and had mastered despite not having an innate talent for it.

"Yes. I am Saint Nephis of the Immortal Flame clan. This is Saint Shadow… of no clan. We are here to bring you two to safety."

The young girl lingered for a few moments, looking at her with a complicated expression.

That expression was not what Nephis had expected.

'Is she… wary of me?'

Eventually, the girl nodded and said in a tone that was meant to be steady, but betrayed a slight tremor:

"I am… Tamar of the Sorrow clan."

'Ah…'

Nephis lingered for a moment.

Sorrow was a vassal clan of Song. So… this girl was technically her enemy.

It was indeed a bit awkward.

The Lord of Shadows stared at her, as if curious to see what she would do. His demonic shell had almost entirely repaired itself, already.

Nephis jumped down into the shallow pit, put her sword down, and looked at the second teenager. Then, she turned back to young Tamar.

"What is wrong with your friend?"

The girl glanced at her black sword, then gripped the other Sleeper tighter.

"Some… kind of infection. She scraped her hand on a vine…"

Then, her eyes trembled slightly.

"Wait, did… did Ray find you, my lady? Is he alive?"

Nephis nodded and kneeled near the unconscious Sleeper, looking at her with concern.

"He is safe and sound. You don't have to worry."

The three must have bonded during their harrowing time in Godgrave. Before that, they had probably spent a lot of time together at the Academy. It wasn't strange for them to care about each other… in fact, Nephis was the strange one, having formed no bonds at the Academy.

There had been a reason for that, of course. She did not know which of the fellow Sleepers had been sent to kill her, at the time… Cassie had had her circumstances, too. Still, these girls reminded her of the two of them.

Granted, there had been no third member to their small cohort on the Forgotten Shore… there had been no…

A moment later, Nephis shook her head lightly, having lost her train of thought.

Concerned for the unconscious girl, she gently placed her hand on her gaunt body and frowned. The girl's skin was as hot as a furnace, and her pulse was weak… she wasn't just infected. She was dying.

Nephis lingered for a moment, and then glanced at Tamar. She forced herself to smile again.

"...You are safe now. The worst part is almost over. Fear not, for we are here. And we will get you and your friend out, no matter what."

The young girl stared at Nephis for a few moments, then took a trembling breath and nodded. Then, she suddenly slumped, as if finally allowing her exhausted body to collapse. Her eyes glistened with moisture, but she gritted her teeth and held the tears back.

"Thank you… thank you. Lady Changing Star."

Nephis nodded and turned away, secretly gritting her teeth.

Then, she activated her Dormant Ability and endured the blinding pain, sending a wave of healing flame into the second Sleeper's body.

The infection was persistent, and had spread to the girl's heart. Nevertheless, it was burned away by the purity of soul flame, leaving no trace behind. It just took a little longer than Nephis had expected. She healed most of the damage dealt to the body of the unfortunate Sleeper, as well.

The shadows around her stirred, betraying her companion's restlessness.

The Lord of Shadows spoke from above:

"They're drawing close."

At the sound of his voice, Tamar flinched and looked at Nephis, trying to hide her fear:

"This is… this is Godgrave, isn't it? Can we really escape?"

Nephis dismissed her flames and took a deep breath.

"Of course. I promised, didn't I?"

The young girl stared at her for a few moments, then nodded gravely.

"I'll… trust in you, Lady Changing Star. I'll strive to survive, no matter what."

Her voice sounded resolute.

Neph's smile faltered for a moment.

"...Good. Strive well."

While saying that, she could already feel it…

A spark of longing igniting in the soul of young Tamar, and then turning into a gentle flame.

Connecting the two of them together, and making her a tentative part of Neph's nascent, unrealized, almost non-existent Domain.

Chapter-1678: Path to Supremacy

Nephis had not been dismissive when she answered the question posed by the Lord of Shadows…

How could one kill a Supreme?

After years of striving bitterly to maneuver herself into a position where resisting the Sovereigns was not a foolish, futile, and frivolous delusion, she had come to understand that the only plausible way to defeat them was to attain Supremacy herself.

Years ago, she had come back to the waking world after an eternity of being lost in the Dream Realm, defeated and broken. Back then, she had made a decision to join the Great Clan Valor, knowing that there would be no better way for her to come to know her enemy.

When Nephis killed a Nightmare Creature, she dissected the carcass to examine its anatomy and learn how to slay such abominations better. But she couldn't dissect a Great Clan… so, joining one was the best way to study the enemy from within.

She had also harbored other aspirations — to earn the trust of the King of Swords and therefore place herself in a position where striking him down would be tenable. Nephis was a master of combat, after all, of which deceit and misdirection were integral parts. Life wasn't that different from combat… her life was not, at least.

But, although she had attained some success in her ambition to infiltrate the Great Clan and become trusted by its King, the more Nephis learned about the enemy, the more hopeless her burning desire to vanquish the Sovereigns seemed.

Even if she knew everything there was to know about Valor, and

even if the King of Sword lowered his guard one day… she wasn't confident at all that she would be able to defeat him, despite all her power as a Transcendent Titan.

So… Nephis had to become a Supreme Titan, instead.

The problem was that she was not allowed to even try.

Times had changed, and there were many more Awakened, Masters, and Saints walking the world today. The Sovereigns had relaxed their iron grip on achieving greater power… a little. But they still demanded fealty from the absolute majority of Transcendents, and would certainly never let someone rise to the throne of Supremacy and become their equal.

Anvil and Ki Song could not even tolerate the existence of each other. How could they allow someone else to become their rival?

Not to mention someone like Nephis, who had a perfectly justified reason to hate them and plot their downfall.

They would never let her challenge the Fourth Nightmare. Even if she found a suitable Seed, entered it without permission, and survived… she would be slaughtered immediately after returning to reality. The might of a Sovereign lay in the power of their Domain, after all, and hers would not be established yet right after achieving Supremacy.

A newly crowned Supreme was only inconsequentially more powerful than a Transcendent, considering the perilous threat of the older Domains.

For these reasons, there was only one path for Nephis to take. She had to attain Supremacy without the help of the Nightmare Spell, by following in the footsteps of the Awakened from ancient times.

Not only that, but she had to do it in secret.

…Needless to say, that path was just as problematic.

Nephis had learned a little about how the ancient Awakened walked the path of Ascension from Ananke. However, the old priestess had not known anything about the leap between Transcendence and

Supremacy — after all, there had been no Supremes in Weave.

In fact, the only Sovereign of the River Civilization had been the Serpent King, a stranger from a realm consumed by the Nightmare Spell.

It meant that Nephis could not learn the natural way to Supremacy from somebody else. She had to invent it herself, discovering the long-lost truth without anyone's help.

The task seemed unreasonable even for her, but having no other choice, she had been striving to accomplish it for the last four years.

She had not been able to come anywhere near becoming a Sovereign. But she was mostly sure that she had discovered the key to Supremacy… or rather, the correct lock to it.

Just like the Awakened of ancient times learned to control their essence before forming their soul cores instead of the other way around, Nephis believed that she had to realize a Domain first to become Supreme.

The Nightmare Spell gave humans a chance to challenge the Fourth Nightmare, attain Supremacy, and therefore the ability to manifest a Domain. However, without the Nightmare Spell… Nephis had to claim that authority herself. It was her ability to be the ruler of a Domain that would make her a Sovereign, and not the other way around.

However…

She had no clues about how to manifest a Domain, either.

In the beginning, that was.

Now, four years later, Nephis was at least on the right track — at least she thought she was.

The secret to going further on the Path of Ascension was, reasonably, hidden in the changes that the soul of a living being underwent during Transcendence.

The soul of a Saint broke the limits of the mundane and expanded, coming into contact with the world and becoming intertwined with a part of it. The soul of a Sovereign, then… had to not only become fused with the world, but also claim authority over its part.

That was the essence of Supremacy. To be a ruler.

But every Saint was unique. The nature of the connection they shared with the world was unique, as well. Therefore, each Transcendent had a unique path to Supremacy.

For Nephis herself… that path was easy to understand, but impossibly hard to tread.

After becoming a Saint, her soul had become capable of being nourished by the ambient essence of the world, the spirit essence. Of course, it was only so for the spirit essence born from a particular source.

Most people assumed that her source element was flame, some assumed that it was light. But all of them were wrong.

In truth, Neph's source element, the foundation of her future Domain… was longing.

In hindsight, she should have known it much sooner. It had always been there, in the description of her Aspect…

Aspect: [Light Bringer].

Aspect Rank: Divine.

Aspect Description: [You are a creature of light that was banished and doomed to exist in the darkness. You bring radiance and warmth to wherever you go, but with it comes indescribable longing.]

The spirit essence Nephis could absorb was born from the souls of those living beings she inspired to yearn for something. It didn't matter what they longed for — and, unlike the loyalty demanded by the King of Swords and the Queen of Worms, she didn't need to be the subject of their yearning.

Any kind of aspiration born from knowing her, or knowing about her, became the source of spirit essence for her.

Her [Longing] Ability also seemed to have evolved after her Transcendence, fusing with her presence. Over time, Nephis had noticed that when people were in her presence, their souls grew more susceptible to inspiration, and the flames of their desires burned brighter.

That was the foundation of her future Domain, which she had already built without even knowing it.

Chapter-1679: Beacon of Hope

There were two ways to build a Domain.

One was provided by the Spell, and depended on the Citadels.

By becoming the master of a Citadel, or having a person who had accepted your authority become one, a Supreme could empower and expand their Domain over vast territories. A Citadel was much more than just a stronghold containing a Gateway — it was a daunting construct of impossible sorcery that forcefully subjugated the part of the world surrounding it and brought it under the rule of a Supreme.

That was why both the King of Swords and the Queen of Worms, who controlled most of the human territories in the Dream Realm, were so immensely powerful.

The second way was innate to each Transcendent, and unique to their Aspect.

Nephis suspected that most Domains were territorial in nature, which was the reason why the Spell had based its method on territory.

But not all of them were.

Take the King of Swords, for example. He used the path provided by the Citadels to expand his Domain, but that did not mean that he limited himself to it. The true vessels of his authority were not lands, but people — every warrior wielding a sword forged by him was a part of his Domain, and thus empowered it.

Ki Song collected the dead. There was the mysterious Asterion, as well, who didn't seem to rule any Citadel.

As for Nephis herself, the only way for her to build a Domain was to inspire people, igniting the flames of yearning in their souls. At least

that was her belief.

It had taken countless hours of contemplation and meditation for her to learn how to truly sense the underlying source element of her Aspect. She had noticed the subtle shift in her presence first… or maybe that subtle quality had always been there, too weak to be discerned.

The souls of people shone brighter in Neph's presence, their innermost hopes and aspirations igniting with a stronger flame. Her presence was like kindling for their passions, turning desire into yearning.

And if that yearning was inspired directly by her, or even the idea of her, then a subtle connection was established between them and Nephis, making the inspired a part of her source element.

She had not learned to sense these connections swiftly, though. In fact, it had taken a small breakthrough in mastering her Aspect Legacy for Nephis to grasp the deeper meaning of [Longing].

Her Aspect Legacy was a tree of knowledge that bore seven fruits. She had reaped the benefits of one of them and comprehended the Knowledge of Fire in Twilight.

Since then, Nephis had made strides in comprehending a few others.

Facing the First Seeker in Verge, she had advanced considerably toward the Knowledge of Corruption. And in the last four years, she had not only fully mastered the Knowledge of Destruction, but also started on the path of comprehending Knowledge of Passion.

It was that last branch of her Aspect Legacy that had helped her fathom the underlying nature of her Aspect better, as well as what she was concentrating on mastering now.

Nephis had learned how to sense the subtle connections formed between her and those she inspired. She had also earned the ability to vaguely feel the passions and desires of those around her, which were like sparks and flames burning in their souls.

Of course, not everyone was easy to read… the Lord of Shadows, for

example, was like a closed book, especially when he wore that mask of his.

In any case, after Nephis had gained that understanding, she found out with a bit of surprise that there were already countless people in the world who were connected to her.

As it turned out, her fame was the reason. From the day she had led the Dreamer Army to siege the Crimson Spire and failed to come back with them, the mighty propaganda machine of the government churned, exaggerating her inconceivable achievements and making her into a tragic hero. A truly brilliant figure — indomitable Changing Star, the last daughter of the Immortal Flame clan.

They had even built on the legendary fame of her father and grandfather, turning her into a symbol of human valiance and perseverance.

…For as long as Immortal Flame burned, humanity would not be extinguished. These words were spoken often now by the people born into the era of the Nightmare Spell.

There were even movies made about her, horrendous as they were.

Her sensational return as the only Sleeper in history to conquer the Second Nightmare had only deepened the reverence and veneration people felt toward her, followed by her adoption into Valor, which added the Great Clan's storied prestige to her own.

So, by the time Nephis became a Saint, there were already numerous people for whom she was an inspiration.

And after she became a Saint, their numbers only continued to grow. She could feel it clearly… some were inspired to strive for martial strength. Some were inspired to cultivate the nobility of their characters. Some were inspired to live their lives with earnest confidence, and so on.

There were even many people inspired with a straightforward carnal desire because of her looks. It was a bit awkward for her to sense the kind of yearning they had for her when she was out and about, and

pretend not to notice.

In any case, the foundation of her future Domain was already vast and potent.

But it wasn't vast enough, and it wasn't potent enough.

And so, in the past four years, Nephis had endeavored tirelessly to make it even more solid. To touch the souls of even more people. She had learned how to carry herself, how to present a perfect facade to the masses. She poured her intellect into grasping the Knowledge of Passion. More importantly, she put her sword where her mouth was.

In that sense, the way Clan Valor treated her was ironically of great help. They always sent her to the most deadly battlefields, dispatched her into the epicenters of the most dreadful calamities, as if wishing for her to die. Wherever there was a crisis, Changing Star and her Fire Keepers would arrive, dissipating a flood of Nightmare Creatures with their swords.

Nephis played along with the will of Clan Valor, using these opportunities to show the world her incorruptible will and brilliant radiance, which made her fame even more wide-spread and exalted. Cassie, meanwhile, worked behind the scenes to guide the narrative and fan the flames.

Nephis herself, the Ivory Tower, the Chain Breaker, the Fire Keepers — everything was now a recognizable symbol of selflessness, strength, and nobility. They were beacons of hope in a dark and tumultuous world, bringing people solace… and inspiration.

The number of those touched by her light grew every day, forming countless connections to her soul. Not all of these connections were equal. Some were tentative and feeble, some were radiant and deep. The deepest connections by far were those of the Fire Keepers — her most loyal followers. It was to a degree that she could even reach them with her Aspect Abilities from a distance.

That was one part of what Nephis was doing — the easier part.

The harder part, by far, was coming up with a way to actually turn

this spiderweb of connections — the nascent form of her future Domain — into an actual one.

Nephis… still had no idea how to take this step. She had spent some time studying the changes that had happened to her Soul Sea after she bound the Ivory Tower and let the Fire Keepers place their anchors there, hoping to find a clue from the mysterious mechanisms of the Nightmare Spell. But that had turned out to be a dead end.

So, for now, Nephis was left with no choice but to search… and wait.

She had hoped that she would find a hint before the war started, but now that both of the Great Clans were on the move, that didn't seem possible anymore.

Which was why it was so important for her to establish a foothold in Godgrave, and ready herself for what was going to happen here.

Anvil and Ki Song had to fall before the war was over.

Because if one of them truly defeated the other, their authority would spread to all of humanity.

…Once that happened, even becoming a Supreme would not be enough to slay them.

Chapter-1680: Spirit of Light

The unconscious Sleeper slowly opened her eyes, staring at Nephis with a dazed look. She smiled reassuringly and rose, picking up her sword again.

There was not much time left. The enemies were approaching.

Towering above the three of them — Nephis and the two teenage girls — the Lord of Shadows said coldly:

"It's sweet that you promised to save them. But how are you going to do it? Once we start fighting with those abominations, a single shockwave will be enough to finish these two off."

Nephis climbed out of the pit and helped the girl she had healed up. Tamar followed.

'Good question.'

There was no time to run away, because the asuras were faster than them. Flying away wasn't an option, either, because they would be perfect targets in the air. One toss of a diamond weapon, and there would be no escape.

Even if Nephis could evade, she had to carry at least one of the Sleepers, and neither of the girls would survive the crushing pressure of such maneuvers.

She considered countless strategies in a single second and looked up at the Lord of Shadows.

"You take them and retreat. I'll hold the enemy off, and then join you."

He remained silent for a moment, and then said flatly:

"I refuse."

Nephis blinked.

'Huh.'

She had not expected that answer.

"Why?"

The shadow demon bent down, bringing his onyx helmet level to her face. The darkness nestling inside it was deep and impenetrable.

"You might be fine dying for these Sleepers, Changing Star. But I am not fine with you dying."

One of his onyx claws pointed at her.

"You still owe me a favor, remember? Wouldn't I be cheated if you died before repaying me?"

Nephis tilted her head.

At that moment… she thought that she felt a hint of desire from the Lord of Shadows. Some people's longing was like a spark, some people's longing was like flame. His, though… to her, it felt like a towering pyre that dwarfed everything around.

As it turned out, the Lord of Shadows was a man of dire passion behind that cold exterior.

She couldn't make out the details of what exactly he yearned for, but his unwillingness to see her dead — before she made good on her promise, at least — seemed rather sincere.

It looked like the favor he intended to ask from her was not simple.

A moment later, his soul was shrouded in darkness once again, and she couldn't feel anything.

Nephis sighed.

"What do you propose, then?"

The Lord of Shadows lingered for a moment.

Then, he scratched his horned head, the onyx claws scraping piercingly against the surface of his helmet.

Finally, he sighed.

"I'll take them to the Nameless Temple and return. You… stay alive while I'm gone."

Wasn't that basically what she had suggested?

Nephis raised an eyebrow.

"How long will it take you to make it back to the Citadel and return, Lord Shadow?"

He raised one of his four hands and bent a few fingers, then answered evenly:

"...About six seconds."

She stared at him silently.

Then… she stared some more.

'Huh?'

"You could make a trip from the Citadel to here in three seconds, this whole time? Why did we fight our way here through the jungle, then?"

Usually, Nephis had to make an effort to put emotions into her naturally deadpan voice. But now, she was actually struggling to maintain composure and make it sound calm!

It was an extremely rare occurrence.

The Lord of Shadows shrugged indifferently.

"It would have consumed too much of my essence. Carrying these Sleepers is fine, but you… are too heavy of a burden."

Nephis stared at him silently for a moment, then glanced down involuntarily.

Her body was lithe and slender, like it had always been.

Definitely.

'...Huh.'

The Lord of Shadows remained silent for a moment, too, then added suddenly, his cold tone suspiciously close to sounding a tiny bit rushed:

"Because you are a Transcendent. Your soul is too vast and powerful, that was what I meant."

He took a step forward and placed two of his four hands on the shoulders of the speechless Sleepers.

"Anyway… time is of the essence… so, I'd better go."

A moment later, the three of them dissolved into shadows, leaving Nephis alone in the small clearing.

'A spatial movement Ability.'

She remained motionless for a second, then looked at herself again.

A quiet mumble could be heard:

"...Did I gain muscle?"

Sure, she was not as delicate and pretty as Cassie. And not as elegant and graceful as Seishan. But Nephis was pretty confident in her figure… granted, it wasn't as generous as Effie's…

'What am I even thinking about?'

Just at that moment, the jungle around her exploded, and seven ghastly golems lunged at her from all sides, the world groaning in agony from the violent force of their passing.

Nephis was still looking down.

Before they could reach her, though, her body exploded with a brilliant radiance, and their towering figures were consumed by blinding light.

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Nephis had transformed into a spirit of light.

In that state, her graceful body seemed to be woven out of immaculate white radiance. That radiance contained an unfathomable ocean of furious flame instead of flesh and bone, and was a beautiful vessel for her fiery, titanic soul.

She was like a brilliant star that had taken the form of a human.

The moisture permeating the humid air instantly evaporated. The rotten leaves blanketing the ground turned to ash. The remains of the dead tree blackened and caught fire, being consumed at startling speed.

But the speed with which the mystical wood was being consumed by the white flame was nothing when compared to the speed with which Nephis moved.

Unconstrained by the limitations of mundane flesh, her power exploded.

The whole clearing was flooded with blinding light, and the towering figures of the asuras dissolved in that light. They weren't destroyed, but the red moss covering their cracked armor was immediately incinerated. The mummified flesh within the stone carapaces blackened and smoldered.

The seven diamond weapons fell in unison, but Nephis effortlessly danced out of the way.

Almost at the same time…

She was suddenly in front of one of the abominations, her radiant fist brushing lightly against its stone breastplate.

The massive creature was thrown back. The armor on its chest

cracked and melted, and the thick armor plate on its back exploded, shards of stone turning into molten rain as they fell to the ground.

The world was stark and clear, awash in annihilating pain.

'Three more seconds…'

Nephis wondered how many of these Nightmare Creatures she would be able to kill before the Lord of Shadows returned.

Chapter-1681: Battle Partners

In the form of the radiant spirit, Nephis was much more powerful than her human incarnation. Her speed and might increased vastly, and her fire powers grew much more potent… especially when the beautiful vessel of light was augmented seven times over by her Aspect.

Not only that, but mundane attacks could not hurt her at all — most weapons would simply turn to ash before reaching her, and those that did break through the immolating heat would find no flesh to harm behind it.

Only fire.

So, what hurt her the most was her Flaw, the [Pristine Soul]… and in that form, the danger it posed was much more dire than the suffering she experienced when using her lesser Abilities. The incandescent white void of her soul was so pure and searing that it threatened to consume her, burning away her very self. Perhaps forever.

At least that was what Nephis feared. She rarely used the power of her Aspect in combat, relying on nothing but her martial prowess if there was a choice, and she used her Transformation Ability even less frequently.

Of course, she was not invulnerable even in that brilliant form. There were many beings and weapons there that could harm this fiery vessel of hers, but the damage they dealt would be instantly healed at the cost of her essence. The form of the spirit of light was a manifestation of her incandescent soul, and so, one would have to extinguish her soul completely to destroy it.

Which was not impossible, especially when facing enemies of higher Ranks.

The ancient stone wraiths she was fighting were among such enemies.

[You have slain a Great Beast, Asura of Condemnation.]

[Your soul shines brighter].

[You have slain a Great Beast, Asura of Condemnation.]

[Your soul shines brighter].

[You have slain a Great Beast…]

Nephis managed to bring down three of the seven Nightmare Creatures in quick succession, but after that, the situation worsened. The abominable golems witnessed her power and grasped it, their movements changing as a result.

They were of the Great Rank, after all. For creatures like these, the distinction between flesh and flame was of no importance. The strange diamond weapons they wielded carried their killing will, and before that will, all would be annihilated. The laws of the world themselves bent to accommodate it.

If she was struck by one of the asuras… her soul would not collapse from a single blow, but the damage would be considerable. Even for a Great Beast, destroying a Transcendent Titan would not be easy — but there were a lot of these creatures here, so she had to be careful.

Nephis gave up on offense and evaded the thunderous attacks of the menacing golems, biding her time until the Lord of Shadows returned.

She had not waited for long.

On the seventh second after his departure, the shadow demon shot out of the darkness on the border of the burning clearing, his great odachi plummeting onto one of the asuras a split second later, like the edge of nightfall.

Now, there were two of them facing four Great Beasts.

Nephis and the Lord of Shadows glanced at each other briefly, her radiant, graceful silhouette contrasted starkly against his towering, tenebrous figure.

Then, they exploded with motion.

'I wonder…'

Nephis was concerned for a split second. Her partial transformation was less destructive than the full one, but it still generated terrible heat. The stone armor of the ancient golems withstood it easily, but what about the Lord of Shadows? Very few people were strong enough to fight side by side with her when she went all out.

However, she didn't have to worry.

The onyx carapace of the shadow demon glistened darkly, reflecting the furious white radiance of her flame, but held. That fearsome armor, it seemed… was of a better quality than her own, or at least possessed a very high resistance to elemental attacks.

In any case, he did not seem to have any trouble plunging into the middle of the burning clearing, seemingly unperturbed by the blinding light, scorching heat, and lack of oxygen.

His movements were just as swift, ferocious, and sharp as they had been before.

'That's a relief, then.'

Her spirits were uplifted.

Nephis and the Lord of Shadows clashed with the four asuras, the surrounding jungle swiftly turning into a wasteland of splinters and ash.

The black sword she had wielded had been long obliterated by flames, so Nephis used her stunning speed and agility to fight the abominations with bare hands. She was swift and much smaller than the towering golems, her technique fluid and flawless. The diamond weapons flashed past, never managing to touch her radiant vessel…

However, Nephis herself wasn't able to attack as brazenly as before, either. Using her sublime grasp of the essence of combat, she delivered a constant stream of shallow attacks to her enemies. The stone armor on their wrists, ankles, and joints was gradually melting, slowing the abominations down.

The Lord of Shadows, meanwhile, was a much easier target. Not only was his dark body broad and towering, but he was also slower than her, his terrifying odachi demanding a lot more space to be wielded effectively.

And yet, somehow… none of the attacks of the asuras managed to land on his onyx armor.

His technique was just as sublime as hers, but it was also… strange. Sometimes, his movements did not seem too swift — compared to her, at least — but at other times, it was as if he was so fast as to leave afterimages behind him.

No, not even that… it was as if the Lord of Shadows was sometimes in two places at the same time.

It took Nephis a few moments to understand what was happening.

'Transcendent battle art…'

His spatial movement Ability was intricately woven into his battle style. The Lord of Shadows masterfully used short-distance teleportation to maneuver around the battlefield, blinking from place to place with such speed that it seemed as if he was in several places simultaneously.

The graceful movements of his sword flowed uninterrupted between the jumps, so a slash that started in one spot could land dozens of meters away. An enemy attack could be blocked despite him being nowhere near its path. In a sense, the whole battlefield was within the reach of his serpentine odachi.

There was also another detail...

'He's jumping between shadows.'

After noticing that detail, Nephis also realized with a bit of surprise that the Lord of Shadows was anticipating and making use of her own movements.

Currently, she was the brightest source of light on the battlefield, so the direction of the shadows cast by the massive bodies of the asuras was dictated by her position.

The Lord of Shadows was paying attention to her movements to anticipate the movement of the shadows, and was therefore able to escape the danger freely, unfailingly appearing behind the abominations to deliver a terrible strike and dissolve into the darkness before they could retaliate.

It was… an utterly beautiful display of flawless technique, firm intent, and devious ingenuity.

'...Diabolical.'

Nephis was... impressed.

Dodging the crushing blow of a diamond staff, she floated into the air to avoid being thrown off balance by the quaking earth, and shot forward. Her incandescent palm touched the elbow of the ancient golem, and its elbow joint finally cracked, falling apart in a rain of molten stone.

Now that the enemy was unable to wield the heavy staff effectively, she had a window of opportunity. Landing lightly on the burning ground, Nephis spun and delivered a devastating roundhouse kick to the towering abomination. Her long, slender leg connected to its abdomen, and the asura was thrown back, its entire torso exploding and catching fire.

By the time the burning golem fell to the ground, it was already dead.

…But just as it died, more asuras appeared from the depths of the ruin, lunging at Nephis and her battle partner with silent malice.

Chapter-1682: Hasty Retreat

Nephis and the Lord of Shadow had slain the initial four Great Beasts. But by then, there were already more of the fearsome asuras that had risen from the ruins and reached them, surrounding the two like a fatal tide of ancient stone and sinister, evil will.

She… was coming closer and closer to the cusp of fatigue.

The Lord of Shadows, meanwhile, seemed to be holding back on using his teleportation Ability. He must have told the truth when saying that carrying the two Sleepers all the way to the Citadel and coming back would put a strain on his reserves of essence. It had to be conserved now.

Luckily, their goal was not to obliterate all the ancient wraiths. Their goal was simply to escape… granted, there was some bad luck involved, too.

The easiest route of retreat would have been to escape to the surface through the nearest crack in the dome of the colossal breastbone. But the veil of clouds was torn right now, and the surface was bathed in the light of the annihilating sun. That path was not an option.

Nevertheless, Nephis wasn't too concerned. She was still holding back the most destructive of her powers.

She had no doubt that the Lord of Shadows had a few tricks up his sleeve, as well.

And yet, and yet…

What was that cold, heavy weight pressing down on her heart?

"Move back."

His voice was just as cold as ever.

She didn't hesitate and pushed the ground with her foot, leaving a scorched mark on it and flying more than a hundred meters back almost in an instant.

In the next second, a small lantern of black stone appeared in one of the shadow demon's four hands. His onyx armor shifted and retreated under his obsidian skin, revealing his powerful physique.

Left alone, the Lord of Shadow lingered for a moment, seemingly unable to evade the attacks of the abominable golems in time. Everything that followed happened in a split second.

Their diamond weapons landed on his muscular body, mangling it gruesomely.

A tide of darkness suddenly flowed out of the stone lantern and came alive, enveloping the advancing asuras with a thousand black chains. Even though the Great Beasts tore the chains apart with ease, they were still stalled for several precious moments.

In those moments, the broken, savaged body of the Lord of Shadows swayed slowly… and dissolved into nothingness.

Neph's radiant eyes flashed.

'He…'

But then, a familiar human figure stepped out of the shadows by her side, the onyx helmet closing to hide his face. Completely unharmed.

She let out a silent sigh of relief.

"I suggest we hurry and get away, Lady Nephis."

…Utter indifference.

Well, to be fair, her face was also motionless and impassive. Not that he could see her features in the torrent of brilliant light.

'It's good… that he's alive.'

…Was it good, though? If the Lord of Shadows perished, his Citadel would be hers to take. Bringing such a precious gift to the King of Swords would further her goals greatly.

And yet, Nephis was happy that he was unharmed.

Using the momentary delay of the sinister asuras, the two of them made a hasty retreat. They ran through the ancient ruins, getting closer to the border. The golems gave chase and were gaining on them slowly — not as slowly as Nephis would have hoped, but enough so to give them a chance to escape into the jungle.

There were still a few of the ancient golems stalking the ruin, though. One of them barred their path, prompting Nephis and the Lord of Shadows to perform a flawless pincer attack without exchanging a single word.

His black odachi fell. Her radiant hand flew.

The ghastly Nightmare Creature crumbled to the ground.

[You have slain a Great Beast, Asura of Condemnation.]

The rest of the abominations were right behind them, but the edge of the ruins was already close. Nephis could already see the remains of an ancient wall, overgrown with red moss and twisting vines.

But the cold feeling grasping her fiery heart only grew stronger.

She frowned.

A Saint's intuition was more than an unreliable gut feeling. Transcendent beings were greatly attuned to the world, and could sense subtle changes in it. The flow of spirit essence, the movements of the underlying laws, the changes in the fabric of reality…

Something was very wrong.

'What… what is that?'

Both Nephis and the Lord of Shadows halted, realizing almost at the same time that the edge of the ancient ruins… was somehow getting

further away. No matter how fast they ran, the distance between them and the overgrown wall did not diminish.

They glanced at each other somberly.

In the next moment, the entire world quaked violently, and something massive moved behind them.

Turning around, Nephis saw the ground at the heart of the ancient city moving, rising above the jungle like a mountain. Countless trees toppled and fell down, the sea of vines and bushes drowning in the rolling soil. The ancient structures were revealed from underneath the carpet of red moss, only to crumble moments later.

It was as though something colossal had been sleeping under the ancient jungle, and was now rising from below, its slumber disturbed by the incinerating heat of the white flames and the clamor of fierce battle.

She suddenly felt… horror.

Horror was not something Nephis felt often, and definitely not on her own accord. The only reason for that feeling was that her mind was being affected by an external force.

Neph's flames dimmed a little when a dire realization surfaced in her mind.

Her lips parted, and she whispered a single word:

"...Condemnation."

The Great Beasts they had been battling were called the asuras… the asuras of Condemnation.

She had thought that they were simply a swarm of Nightmare Creatures populating the ancient ruin, their name hinting at some forgotten mystery of the past.

But now, Nephis realized that it had a much more literal meaning.

As the mountain of raised soil started to split open, revealing the

appearance of the being that had been buried underneath, she thought that her horror had been quite an appropriate reaction.

The asuras of Condemnation were not a natural swarm of Great Beasts bound to a single location.

Instead, they were here together for another, much more sinister reason… they were the minions of a much more powerful being.

Their name simply pointed at whom they belonged to.

Their master had to be of a higher Rank, after all.

The Cursed Tyrant... Condemnation.

Chapter-1683: Dark Deity

A Cursed Tyrant…

Nephis felt an unfamiliar emotion that she couldn't quite describe. Awe, perhaps? Or maybe hatred.

The pure flames of her soul roared, surging restlessly in the presence of the harrowing adversary.

Cursed Nightmare Creatures were… the epitome of terror. Each of them was equal to what a Sacred being would have been — not that there were any of those around. Nevertheless, Sacred beings held a special meaning for humanity.

That was because of what the steps of the Path of Ascension meant, at least as far as humans theorized.

If the Path of Ascension was the road to divinity, then each step brought those treading it closer to godhood. Transcendence was the step of breaking away from the limits of the mundane. Supremacy was the act of asserting one's power over the world, thus establishing the foundation of their future apotheosis.

But it was the next step, which no Awakened of their world had taken before, that signified truly attaining the qualities of the divine. A Sacred being was already a deity, albeit a lesser one.

The same could be said about a Cursed being. The Cursed Tyrant, Condemnation, could very well be called a deity. A profane deity of abyssal Corruption.

And so, in a sense…

Today was the first time Nephis would face a god in battle.

But not the last.

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Time seemed to slow down as Condemnation rose from beneath the ruins. The gargantuan shape of the ancient fiend was still hidden behind the layers of collapsing soil and crumbling buildings, but it was already like a towering mountain. The quaking earth, the scale of it all… seemed more like a natural process than the movements of a living being.

Or rather, unnatural.

Witnessing the sleeping giant wake from its slumber, Nephis could finally guess how this ancient city had been destroyed, and why it had fallen despite the dire might of its defenders. The warriors that wielded the dreadful power of the sorcerous exosuits and the sublime diamond weapons, the asuras… had perished when the Cursed Tyrant descended upon their city like a cataclysm.

Even their impossible strength had not been enough to save this land, which was now a forgotten ruin. One of many similar ruins swallowed by the jungle.

Such was the caliber of enemies the civilization of Godgrave had faced before extinction.

It certainly made one wonder…

If the same fate awaited the civilization of the waking world — the last human civilization.

America had already been lost to the advent of a Category Five Gate, Antarctica to the Chain of Nightmares. Humans were migrating to the Dream Realm now… but what would happen if a Cursed Tyrant was attracted by the smell of human souls and attacked Bastion? Or Ravenheart?

How long would the Great Clans last if the true horrors of the Dream Realm abandoned the Death Zones to roam its vast expanse freely?

Safety… was an illusion.

The waking world was dying, but the Dream Realm was a death trap as well. Of that, Nephis was certain.

Which was why the Sovereigns had to be eliminated.

Not because they had killed her father. Not because they had sent assassins after her and turned her childhood into a cruel nightmare. Not because they had brought the Immortal Flame clan to ruin… although Nephis would lie if she said that none of that mattered.

It was not even because of the countless lives lost because of their schemes in Antarctica.

The reason… was that the Sovereigns were not up to the task. They were incompetent, strangling humanity's power in pursuit of misguided reasons. Ki Song, Anvil, Asterion — none of the three was wise enough, determined enough. And desperate enough.

Their achievements were great, and they might have thought that their cynical tyranny was for the greater good. But they were not someone who could defeat the Nightmare Spell.

That said, to have a chance to defeat them and bring about change…

Nephis had to survive the meeting with this Cursed Tyrant first.

She gritted her teeth.

'There is no escape…'

A Cursed Tyrant was like a deity, and a deity could exert great power upon the world. The ruins of this ancient city were Condemnation's territory, and so, its will here was like a law here.

If it didn't want to let the two Saints leave, they wouldn't be able to leave. Nephis and the Lord of Shadows had already witnessed how space itself was preventing them from escaping into the jungle.

What other option was there?

If they couldn't escape, they had to fight. But defeating a Cursed Tyrant in battle was not something either of them was capable of…

even surviving a single attack by the profane being was questionable.

The gap was too great.

Nephis glanced at the Lord of Shadows and asked, her clear voice resounding in the roar of the quaking earth:

"That spatial Ability of yours… can you escape?"

He shook his head.

"Not this time."

'Not this time…'

It sounded as if this was not his first time encountering a Cursed Nightmare Creature.

Just what kind of life had he led?

Nephis took a deep breath.

…Or rather, she mimicked the familiar motions of taking a deep breath. The radiant spirit did not have lungs, after all, and neither needed nor was capable of breathing. It was simply a vessel containing a vast ocean of flame.

She had been prepared to unleash her full Transformation if things went south. However… the current situation was way worse than even her worst prediction. Even if she did allow the spirit form to dissolve, releasing the ocean of flame contained within its brilliant figure, she wouldn't be able to contend against the Cursed Tyrant.

'No other choice, then.'

Well... it couldn't be helped. She had managed to come closer than usual to fully saturating her soul cores this time around, already.

The important part was to make the sacrifice count.

Watching a vague figure reveal itself from beneath the mountain of flowing soil, Nephis glanced at the approaching asuras and said

evenly:

"Hold back these creatures, then. I'll… create an opportunity for the two of us to escape."

Surrounded by radiant light, Nephis concentrated for a moment…

And reached into her incandescent soul.

Chapter-1684: Pure Agony

They could not escape, but they also could not fight the Cursed Tyrant.

In that situation, the only way out Nephis saw was to create a momentary lapse in the Tyrant's concentration.

It was the abomination's profane will that was preventing them from reaching the jungle. If that will was weakened, even for a few moments, a path to freedom would be theirs to take.

Nephis had no hope of killing the evil deity, and no confidence to face it in a prolonged battle. However… she was pretty sure that she could at least hurt it.

She knew pain better than most. She knew how hard it was to keep calm and steady when your body and soul were being blackened by flame. How it felt to burn alive.

Anyone's will would be shaken by that agony.

But her adversary this time was a Cursed Tyrant. Not any flame would be able to hurt it, and her usual attacks were woefully insufficient.

So, she had to give it her all.

…Which required time.

The Lord of Shadows had to buy her that time.

As the pursuing asuras closed in on them, he glanced at her briefly.

Then, he sighed and let go of his black odachi.

The tenebrous sword fell to the ground, but rippled like liquid in the

air. She thought that she saw a glimmer of serpentine scales.

A moment later, the odachi turned into a torrent of shadows, and then coalesced into a human form… that of a woman, both her clothes and skin perfectly black, her hair like a waterfall of silken darkness. She was standing with her back to Nephis, so her face was hidden from view. And yet, it felt like the mysterious woman was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

More than that… her presence was that of a Transcendent.

A moment ago, there were two Saints facing the Great Beasts.

Now, there were three.

Pulling another sword out of the darkness, the Lord of Shadows lunged at the ghastly asuras without wasting any time. The black woman followed, moving with dire speed and indescribable grace.

They clashed with the abominations a split second later.

Sadly, Nephis could not observe their battle.

She was reaching into her soul.

The blinding light emanated by her radiant figure grew even more intense, its heat more unbearable. The vines and moss covering the ruins around her turned to ash, revealing ancient stone structures. The weathered stone started to melt.

'It's going to hurt…'

Her goal was to cause the Cursed being pain, but to achieve it, she had to withstand her own share of agony.

As something too harrowing to witness and too appalling to see slowly revealed itself from beneath the collapsing soil, Nephis steeled her will… and ignited her soul.

It was different from summoning soul flame or activating her Abilities. What she was doing was a derivative skill of her Aspect, something she had always been capable of, but only truly learned

how to do in Twilight.

Instead of merely burning soul essence, she was burning her very soul.

But, unlike the crude way she had done so in Twilight, Nephis was doing it in a much more refined and controlled manner now.

With each moment, her soul cores grew weaker, and her counter of soul fragments plummeted with dire speed. Each soul fragment she sacrificed turned into a torrent of immolating flame.

That incandescent inferno grew and grew, the terrifying power contained within it reaching a truly chilling scale.

Nephis could detonate a soul core to produce a tremendous explosion. But an explosion was a wild thing… it spread in all directions, annihilating everything in its path. Such a calamity could obliterate a vast number of enemies, both weak and strong.

To deal a wound to someone as strong as a Cursed Tyrant, however, such a dispersed tool of destruction was suited poorly. She needed something much more concentrated, targeted, and controlled.

Consumed by a harrowing agony, Nephis endured the feeling of her soul being burned to ash, and slowly raised a radiant hand.

In front of her, the Lord of Shadows and the mysterious Saint he had summoned were drowning in the tide of Great Beasts.

She concentrated deeply, and whispered several Names, shaping them into a verse. Channeling that verse put a terrible strain on her mind, her burning soul, and even her brilliant vessel.

The Name of the Fire to control the flames.

The Name of the wind to fan them.

These two were easier.

The other two…

Nephis trembled as she uttered a terrible word.

It was the Name of Destruction.

The Name of Destruction to greatly enhance the destructive force of her soul flame.

And finally, the last one…

Perhaps the most important one.

She smiled darkly.

"...Condemnation!"

The True Name of the Cursed deity, the hint to which had been so generously provided to her by the Spell.

To bind the devastating flame to the ancient fiend, and bind the fiend to the flame.

Names were a powerful thing.

And so, Nephis called flame and destruction upon the Tyrant, using her own soul as fuel.

In the next moment, a perfectly white ray of concentrated flame shot off her palm, connecting it to the terrible shape of the rising giant many kilometers away. Its arrival was instantaneous. Its passing burned the world itself, leaving a scar on it.

Even though it consisted of flame, it seemed like a ray of pure white light.

That light bit into the flesh of Condemnation, slicing it apart like a sharp blade. Terrible burns were left in its wake.

And just as Nephis was drowning in terrible agony…

The Cursed Tyrant convulsed, its mind pierced by unbearable pain.

An indescribable, deafening, harrowing sound shook the world. It was a sound that would drive a mundane person… no, even an

Awakened, a Master, a weaker Saint… mad from simply hearing it.

Condemnation was screaming.

"R—run!"

Nephis swayed, her radiance dimming. Her Transformation was dismissed, and she once again turned into a human. The white tunic she had been wearing was singed and burned, barely holding in place.

'Right… I should summon the rest of my armor…'

But she was momentarily dazed, paying the price for burning away a part of her soul.

Nephis had told the Lord of Shadows to run, but found herself unable to follow her own advice.

Before she could do anything, though, two strong arms grabbed her. Raising her unceremoniously, he dashed away without saying a word. The onyx surface of his armor was smooth and cool to the touch.

'Am… am I… being carried?'

She was stunned.

When had something like that ever happened to her?

"Grab a hold of yourself, princess!"

Despite the situation, his voice sounded as cold and arrogant as always. Maybe even a little colder than usual.

She closed her eyes for a moment, then summoned the rest of her armor.

By the time it weaved itself from sparks of light, the Lord of Shadows let go of her, and they ran toward the edge of the ruins together.

The echoes of the Cursed Tyrant's pained howl were still traveling across the Hollows when they escaped into the jungle, leaving the

forgotten city behind.

Just like that, their one-on-one expedition into the Hollows was over.

***

A few hours later, Nephis was sitting on the steps of the Nameless Temple.

The world… was mercilessly stark, black and white, with no place left for feeling or compromise.

As it always happened after she overused her Aspect, her emotions were dampened and weak, almost gone. Her heart was cold.

Or maybe it was so impossibly scorching that it felt cold.

She was tired, but couldn't feel the tiredness.

One could not remember pain, but remembering having suffered pain was all too easy.

Raising a hand, she allowed a soft radiance to ignite under her skin and stared at it silently.

'It still hurts.'

Good. That was good. Nephis knew that she had not truly lost herself as long as she could still feel the pain, and fear it.

She sighed.

It was time to return.

The Fire Keepers had already gathered in front of her, ready to depart. The three Sleepers were also there, looking around with awe and amazement. Even Tamar, the Legacy girl, was subdued by the solemn atmosphere of the dark temple.

The master of the temple, meanwhile, had not come to see them off. Only his Echo was watching.

The Lord of Shadows…

Such a mysterious man.

Nephis tilted her head a little, remembering how he behaved in the forgotten ruin. Not during the battle… but before it.

Surprisingly enough, the cold warrior seemed to have a lot of interest in history, almost like an explorer. That was a side of him she had not seen before.

Which was understandable, considering that they didn't know each other too well.

However...

At that moment, her indifferent eyes glinted slightly.

She thought back to their first meeting, when he challenged her to a duel.

The style he used once belonged to her family — naturally, Nephis had asked the Lord of Shadows who taught that style to him.

And what had he answered?

Her lips parted.

"...Nobody."

Chapter-1685: Booming Business

"Boss… are you okay?"

Aiko's voice sounded a bit confused as she glanced at Sunny with a dubious expression. The petite girl was floating near the ceiling, taking inventory of their liquor shelf. He, meanwhile, was busy cooking and cursing under his breath.

There were a lot of customers today, but Sunny could not even manifest an avatar to keep up with the flood of orders.

'That third guy! Selfish bastard!'

He gritted his teeth.

'Where did all my essence go?!'

The gloomy shadow, left to its devices for once, was staring at him mockingly. Sunny glared at it back.

'What? I know we're the same person! It's a figure of speech, okay?!'

The phrase "you have no one to blame but yourself" had never been so poignant.

The last few days had not been easy on Sunny, and it was all because of his third avatar. First, there was the problem with Weaver's Mask… he had intended for the Lord of Shadow to wear it at all times, but in practice, it made having any kind of sensible conversation impossible.

Well… not impossible, maybe. But definitely way too frustrating.

So, Sunny had been busy crafting a special Memory for the third

avatar ever since returning from the mirror maze beneath Bastion.

He could not really reproduce the [Mantle of Lies] — Weaver's Mask was a Divine Memory, after all, so making a copy of even a single enchantment was utterly beyond his ability.

He could create a knock-off Weaver's Mask, though, by using an alteration of the Nebulous Mantle's enchantments. He had even added a bit of the [Autumn Leaf] — one of the Memories he had lost — into the mix.

As a result, the Lord of Shadows could still remain a mystery. His voice, height, hair color, and mystical traits were either hidden or distorted. Of course, he was not immune to all forms of divination unless the real Weaver's Mask was summoned… but since Cassie already knew the truth and had agreed to hide it, there was no need for such a level of secrecy. For now, at least.

Until the forces of the Great Clans arrived at Godgrave.

In any case, creating this Memory, which Sunny lazily named [Definitely Not Me], had kept him awake for a few nights. It was imperative that he created it, though…

Awakened with affinity to shadows were already very rare, and if the humble shopkeeper in Bastion was discovered to not only share this rare trait with the mysterious Lord of Shadows, but also have similar height and build as the mysterious Saint… his peaceful life would be over.

Pulling a few all-nighters was a bit of a chore, but he could manage it.

But then, he had to go and waste an ocean of essence in Godgrave, as well!

Traversing the Hollows and fighting Great Beasts was already bad enough. But then, Sunny decided to transport the two Sleepers back all by himself… the ruins of the forgotten city were situated in the vicinity of the Nameless Temple, but only relative to the overall size of the region. In truth, there was close to two hundred kilometers

between them.

It was well within his power to make three or four consecutive jumps while carrying two Dormant humans, and then come back the same way. The essence cost of such travel was very high, though, draining his reserves to a dangerous degree.

So, now…

Sunny felt rather helpless. He couldn't even allow himself to manifest an additional avatar, let alone do something more strenuous. Whatever essence he had left had to be preserved in case there was an emergency.

It was a good thing that Nephis had left Godgrave with the Fire Keepers. Gods knew, he wouldn't want her to see him in such a pathetic state.

So, Sunny had no choice but to suffer and curse silently.

"Ready. Send it to the seventh table!"

Aiko used her telekinesis to send a beautifully plated dish into the dining hall, and he finally had a minute to rest. Sunny sighed, took a sip of water from the Endless Spring, and frowned slightly.

[Sunny.]

Cassie's voice suddenly resounded in his head, creeping him out.

He was still not used to that.

…But at the same time, it strangely felt too familiar.

[Yes, Saint Cassia?]

A moment later, her soft voice resounded again:

[About the Memory commission. I'll send someone to your shop today to explain the details.]

He raised an eyebrow.

She was already whispering into his ear… figuratively speaking. Was there really a need to send someone? Couldn't she just explain what she wanted straight away?

…Maybe Cassie was conserving essence, too.

He shrugged.

[Alright. Is there anything else? Sorry, I'm a bit busy… lots of customers today.]

She remained silent for a moment.

[There is nothing else. Well… actually. I do have something to say.]

Sunny's expression darkened. What was going on? Had she received a vision and wanted to hint at something? That couldn't be right… hadn't Cassie told him that the future could not be seen clearly anymore?

He looked down.

[I'm all ears.]

Strangely enough, she lingered for a while this time. Eventually, though, her voice rustled in his mind once more:

[It's nothing important, really. Just a little piece of advice… in the future, you might want to avoid using words like "heavy" and "burden" when speaking to women. You know, just thought I would share…]

His eye twitched.

Cassie's tone was polite and serious, but he couldn't help but feel that she was suppressing… laughter?

Sunny cleared his throat.

[...Oh. That's funny. Almost as funny as the fact that I've lived peacefully on my own, but just a couple of days after the woman in question showed up on my doorstep, there was suddenly a Cursed

Tyrant trying to gobble me up. A person with less decorum than me could call that a bit burdensome, don't you think?]

There was no answer.

He waited for a while, then took a deep breath.

"Damnation."

Sunny was slowly starting to realize what the most terrible thing about Cassie's Ability was not that she could spy on almost anyone undetected.

It was that she was the one in control of who had the last word!

Muttering under his breath, he returned to cooking.

***

The day passed in a blur. Sunny was so busy that he had not sat down once until the evening… which, in theory, was a good thing.

Why would he complain about how popular his restaurant was becoming? Cassie's commission was bound to be very profitable for the Brilliant Emporium, as well.

It was just that working hard and working hard while also working hard in two other places were two entirely different things!

As the sun rolled behind the horizon and the crescent moon appeared in the velvet sky, the dining hall of the Brilliant Emporium became deserted. Aiko had left, leaving Sunny to close down on his own.

He was carrying a tray of dirty dishes to the kitchen when someone approached the door.

'Must be the person Cassie sent…'

He turned to the door, waiting for the person to enter.

When the Silver Bell rang, though…

Sunny suddenly tripped and fell on his face. The dishes rolled on the

floor.

'What... what is she doing here?!'

Laying on the floor, he cautiously looked up.

Long legs… slender waist… a light summer dress... alabaster skin…

The silky hair was black, but it was hardly enough to disguise her.

Sunny's eyes widened.

'The "person" Cassie promised to send... is Nephis?!'

Indeed, there was no mistake.

Nephis, who had just left the Nameless Temple yesterday, was now somehow here, in the Brilliant Emporium.

Looking down at him in confusion.

She hesitated for a moment, and then asked in a polite tone:

"...Master Sunless? I've been told that you can create powerful Memories."

Chapter-1686: Acts of Humanity

For Nephis, the world was still stark and sharp, devoid of subtlety. Her emotions were still subdued, and mostly missing. It had not been long since the battle with Condemnation — if their desperate escape could even be called a battle — and so, she had not recovered from the annihilating pain of burning her soul to ash yet.

She had been in Godgrave just yesterday. Back then, they had waited on the steps of the Nameless Temple for a long time for its master to come and take them back to the waking world. Nephis could have carried her warriors across the threshold of realms herself, but the tentative agreement with the Lord of Shadows was preventing her from placing a tether in the vicinity of his Citadel.

In the end, the mysterious Saint walked out of the darkness and silently brought the Fire Keepers, the three Sleepers, and herself away from the Dream Realm, one at a time. She suspected that he could carry more than one person across realms — Nephis herself could carry seven other Saints, or more than a hundred mundane people — but Shadow kept his secrets close to his chest, as always.

She had been idly curious where his tether in the waking world would be. Saints usually had an established base there, most within the well-guarded walls of their clan's compound. Nephis herself, as well as the Fire Keepers, operated from the former manor of the Immortal Flame clan.

It was a bit of a contentious topic, actually, because the elders of Valor wanted them to reside within the great clan's stronghold in NQSC — officially, for safety reasons, but truthfully to control them better.

But the relationship between the Fire Keepers and the rest of Valor forces was generally a bit awkward, not the least because of the six months the survivors of the Forgotten Shore had spent hiding in the

Dream Realm to avoid the fallout of Cassie's conflict with the great clan. It had only been resolved after Nephis returned and agreed to become Anvil's adopted daughter.

In any case… there were no independent Saints, really. Everyone either had a Legacy clan supporting them or worked for the government. So, Nephis was understandably curious about where the Lord of Shadows tethered himself in the waking world.

Was it a secret compound in NQSC? An unassuming residential building? A stronghold of a minor Legacy clan in one of the other Quadrants? The remains of an abandoned government facility, perhaps?

She had idly imagined all kinds of places, thinking that they might hint to his real background.

Curiously enough, though, the tether of the Lord of Shadows was carelessly placed in the middle of an empty street in the outskirts of NQSC. The outskirts were much more desolate now than they had been before, with many people having left for the Dream Realm. There were many abandoned areas like this one, where there was hardly any foot traffic.

While unconventional, the placement of the tether seemed to be dictated by nothing except for pure convenience, which had not told her anything at all.

Nephis had been the last one to be brought over. The Lord of Shadows did not waste any time on saying goodbyes, nodding at her curtly before dissolving into the darkness.

Just like that, her expedition to Godgrave was over.

There were a lot of things she had to do after that. Nephis visited the three Sleepers at the Academy to check on them — since they had never managed to anchor themselves in the Dream Realm, they would have to request the help of a Saint, pass through one of the Dream Gates, or wait for the next winter solstice to complete their Awakening.

She would have offered her help, but considering Tamar's allegiance to the Song Domain, having her anchor in Bastion was not an option.

After that, the Fire Keepers either returned to the Immortal Flame manor or went straight back to the Ivory Tower. They needed some rest.

As for Nephis herself…

She made her way to the compound of Clan Valor. Then, it was a whirlwind of briefings and reports, as well as a lot of waiting. Luckily, Cassie was there to help her manage the most tedious parts.

It was not until the morning of the next day that Nephis had a chance to rest and recover. She ate a late breakfast, took a long shower, and put on some mundane clothes. Going through the motions.

It was a bit annoying. Everything not having to do with furthering her goal was, in her current state.

Eventually, she ended up making an appointment with her therapist.

Nephis had been assigned a psychological counsellor after returning from her Second Nightmare, and was seeing one periodically to this day.

Of course, it was a bit of a farcical affair.

She believed that there was some benefit to receiving counselling — gods knew, her mental state was far from untroubled. It had been especially bad after the Second Nightmare, and would turn cold and emotionless every time she overused her Aspect. Nephis… was concerned about losing the sight of her humanity, which was the reason she had agreed to therapy.

However, it wasn't hard to guess that her assigned therapist was making regular reports about everything she said during their sessions. At first, the reports had gone to the government.

After Nephis joined Clan Valor, her initial counsellor was suddenly unavailable, and referred her to a colleague. The new counsellor was unmistakably making detailed reports to the elders of the Great Clan.

So, it was a charade. Nephis pretended not to know and continued to visit the therapist to nurture the feeling of false control Clan Valor had regarding her.

That said, even a charade could be useful sometimes.

There were many useful things she had learned from the counsellors while they were learning falsehood from her.

For example… the act of wearing mundane clothes. Nephis would have been comfortable never dismissing her armor Memories, but it was these small acts of human behavior that tethered her to humanity.

She was also often encouraged to participate in mundane leisure activities and communicate with ordinary people more. There were other small things she had learned to do, as well. Nephis found these tasks a bit tedious, but beneficial to the state of her soul.

It was also good to her current endeavor of mastering the Knowledge of Passion. She tended to spend all her time in the company of a certain kind of people — Awakened warriors, and elite ones at that. Their passions burned bright, but were usually colored with similar hues.

Experiencing a wide range of human hopes and aspirations was bound to help her understand that elusive branch of her Aspect Legacy better.

And so… Nephis listened to her counsellor well.

Which was why she arrived at the quaint café in a remote part of Bastion feeling very uncomfortable in a light summer dress.

Chapter-1687: Suddenly, and Without Warning

It was winter in NQSC, but here in Bastion, the weather was warm and mild. Nephis did not receive a lot of opportunities to take a leisurely stroll around town, but she remembered enjoying the thriving atmosphere of the swiftly developing city during her last outing, which was… about a year ago, now?

The city sprawling around the beautiful lake had changed tremendously since then. Of course, Nephis was familiar with all these changes — she gazed down upon the bustling streets of Bastion often from the tranquil height of her heavenly island, studying the lively flow of human activity from a distance.

Every time the Ivory Tower returned here, the city seemed different. The humans, however, were the same.

Sadly, Nephis did not enjoy diving into their liveliness today. She was still recovering from the battle with Condemnation, after all.

Her stroll was not entirely for leisure, either.

She had left the castle with a specific purpose in mind.

Nephis had long been searching for a talented enchanter. She and the Fire Keepers received plenty of Memories by slaying Nightmare Creatures, sure, but those Memories were too dependent on the whims of the Spell. Very few of them suited her needs perfectly, or were powerful enough to make a difference.

That was where Awakened enchanters could help. The problem was that craftsmen capable of forging Memories, or even enchanted items, were extremely rare. Most of them belonged to the Valor family, and while Nephis could easily commission a Memory from her own

clan… that would defeat the purpose.

It was precisely because her most powerful Memories were either known to or directly created by the Great Clan Valor that she was searching for an independent enchanter in secret.

Yesterday, Cassie informed her that their search had finally borne fruit. Not only that, but the person in question resided right here, in Bastion… and as a cherry on top, he even happened to possess an extremely rare affinity to shadows.

The last part was of no importance for the commission, but given the sudden entrance of the Lord of Shadows on the stage, Nephis was curious to learn more about this unusual element and its nuances.

Therefore… Cassie had decisively sent her to meet the enchanter personally. Nephis was not sure why she had to go herself, but since Cassie assured her that this person could be trusted to keep a secret, she arrived at the place late in the evening — knowing her friend, the man would have passed an extensive background check, so there was no reason not to.

That said, it wasn't easy for Nephis to walk freely on the streets of Bastion. Her fame was too great to remain unrecognized. So, she used several cosmetic Memories to slightly alter her appearance… even then, she had only ventured out after it was already dark.

Reaching the quiet lakeshore street, she glanced at the cosy brick cottage, and then at the sign hanging above the door.

'Sunny's Brilliant Emporium: Café & Memory Boutique.'

For a moment, Nephis tried to imagine what it would have felt like, to live in a simple cottage like that and make a living by doing peaceful things, away from the bloodshed and stench of the battlefield.

All of it seemed so… alien.

And yet, that was exactly how this humble enchanter — and most people in the world — lived. This peaceful life was what she was trying not to lose sight of.

Well… the peaceful part was true, but very few people lived in a cottage quite as unique as this one. Cassie had warned her that it was a strange kind of Echo. Otherwise, there was a risk that Nephis would misunderstand things and accidentally burn it to the ground.

Nephis took a deep breath, prepared herself mentally for the awkward feeling of meeting an unfamiliar person, and walked inside.

A moment later…

There was the sound of plates scattering on the floor.

She froze, looking down in confusion.

The enchanter was sprawled on the floor, staring at her with a stunned expression. He seemed to be… a very clumsy person, to have tripped on his own feet like that.

No coordination whatsoever. A person like that would definitely not last long on the battlefield… which was fine. Not everyone was born for combat.

They stared at each other silently for a few moments, and then the young man jumped to his feet, dusting off his clothes in embarrassment.

Having done so, he smiled at her as if nothing had happened.

"Welcome to the Brilliant Emporium."

Nephis was momentarily stumped.

When Cassie had told her about a talented Master capable of forging powerful Memories, she had imagined an older man, sharp and austere — like most smiths of Valor were.

What she had not expected was that the shopkeeper would be so young, delicate… and good-looking.

Nephis was used to being in the company of extremely attractive people, of course. And yet, the proprietor of the Brilliant Emporium stood out even among them... most Saints included.

He was not very tall, with a slender build and delicate features. His skin was smooth and white, like flawless marble, while his onyx eyes were like darkly glistening gems. His raven-black hair was carelessly gathered in a knot, and there was a subtle sense of calm confidence to him… one that seemed understated, but almost demanded attention.

He was like an elegant porcelain doll dressed in fine black silk.

This softer kind of beauty of his was so unlike the rugged handsomeness of the seasoned warriors Nephis usually encountered. More than that… the young man entirely lacked presence — the mystical kind — hinting that he wasn't very powerful a Master.

Which… made sense. Not every Awakened was a warrior, and after Antarctica, there were even plenty of Masters who had Ascended out of necessity, not choice. Someone with a Utility Aspect did not have to wield a sword, and many lived without experiencing much strife or violence.

Or even none whatsoever.

No matter how distant and strange such a life seemed to Nephis.

'Cassie… did not tell me…'

She suddenly realized that she had been silent for too long.

Keeping her face expressionless, Nephis spoke:

"Ah… yes. Master Sunless, I presume? Saint Cassia sent me."

The enchanter looked at her strangely, hesitated for a moment, and then said politely:

"Indeed, I am called Master Sunless. Please forgive me, Lady Nephis. Saint Cassia did not warn me…"

Nephis nodded.

"Yes. She didn't warn me, either."

He blinked.

"Sorry?"

She cleared her throat and looked away in embarrassment.

"No, nothing. I am here to talk about a Memory."

Chapter-1688: Cherry on Top

'I think… I might kill Cassie…'

Sunny kept a smile on his face to hide how startled and rattled he was. It may have looked a bit sheepish… and he may have looked like a bit of a clown… but there was nothing he could do about that.

It already took a titanic effort for Sunny not to glance at the dirty dishes scattered on the floor, or summon a swarm of shadows to quickly clean them away.

'Keep calm!'

Nephis was here, in the Brilliant Emporium.

Looking at him with a strange expression.

Well, of course her expression was strange! He had just made a fool out of himself right in front of her. And that was technically their first meeting, no less, which started with him planting on his face.

Sunny wanted to fall through the floor.

'Actually, that might be possible.'

It would not take a lot for the Marvelous Mimic to swallow him into the basement.

Struggling to throw these thoughts out of his head, Sunny asked in as polite of tone as he could manage, given the circumstances:

"Indeed, I am called Master Sunless. Please forgive me, Lady Nephis. Saint Cassia did not warn me…"

Not only was Nephis here… but she was also wearing a dress.

A dress!

That should have been categorized as a crime.

Her light dress was simple and white, with not much decoration. It covered her shoulders and had a modest neckline, the hem resting somewhat high above her knees. Nevertheless, the modesty of the dress only served to accentuate the graceful line of her slender body, and the stark contrast between her alabaster skin and black hair only made her grey eyes look more striking.

Suddenly, Sunny was thankful that it was already dark outside. Otherwise, Neph's appearance might have caused the Brilliant Emporium to be besieged by a mob of admirers.

And then, he would have had to hold himself back from minting a fresh batch of soul coins.

Suddenly, he realized that Nephis had said something. He had no idea what.

Sunny blinked.

"Sorry?"

She cleared her throat, then looked away… perhaps in displeasure at his lack of manners and mental faculties.

"No, nothing. I am here to talk about a Memory."

Sunny forced out another smile, then gestured to one of the tables.

"Please, take a seat. I will be with you shortly."

He pulled out a chair for her, then swiftly picked up the scattered plates and escaped into the kitchen. Before going in, though, Sunny hesitated for a moment.

"Would you like something to drink? We just received a fresh batch of coffee beans and tea…"

She shook her head.

"Water is fine."

He nodded and entered the kitchen.

A moment later, Sunny leaned against the wall and breathed heavily.

'What the hell?!'

He had been anticipating meeting Nephis for a long, long time. So, he was mentally prepared to face her… but the one meant to face her was the Lord of Shadows! Not him, the humble and unassuming shopkeeper!

There was no reason whatsoever for someone as exalted as Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan to visit the Brilliant Emporium, so Sunny had never once imagined that she would.

'Calm down!'

Sunny took a deep breath, then quietly checked to see if the Nebulous Mantle was working.

Everything was fine. His presence was hidden, and his facade of a harmless artisan was sufficiently maintained. In fact, this year of living peacefully in Bastion had smoothed out his edges, so this incarnation of his looked somewhat gentle.

There was no way someone would associate the innocuous owner of the Brilliant Emporium with the antisocial, menacing Lord of Shadows.

'...Good.'

Still, what the hell was Cassie thinking about?

[Saint Cassia… what the hell?]

As he poured water from the Endless Spring into a glass, she answered pleasantly:

[What do you mean?]

The glass almost exploded in Sunny's hand.

[Why is Changing Star here?]

He could just imagine the blind seer laughing somewhere across the lake, in the Castle.

[Why wouldn't she be there? The Memory I wanted to commission is for her. She is the best person to explain what she needs.]

He opened his mouth, then closed it again, not knowing how to answer.

[...What have you told her about me?]

Cassie's voice resounded in his head, calm and steady:

[That you can forge powerful Memories, can be trusted to keep a secret, and have an affinity to shadows.]

The last part was a bit problematic, but after thinking about it for a moment, Sunny had to admit that it was for the best that Nephis had been warned in advance. She would have noticed the nature of his Aspect sooner or later, anyway — it was better to inform her first to prevent her from getting the wrong idea.

Or rather, the right idea.

In any case…

Carrying the glass of water back… Sunny somehow found himself also carrying a small plate with a piece of cherry cake on it, as well. He had made the cake this morning to prevent the batch of Beast Farm cherries from going bad, but as to how it ended up on a plate in his hand right now… Sunny's recollection was foggy.

He was suddenly full of suspicion.

[...You didn't erase my memories, did you?]

For the first time in a while, Cassie's voice sounded confused:

[Huh?]

He gritted his teeth. Of course, she didn't. She wouldn't have been able to in such a short amount of time, not to mention without looking him in the eyes.

[Never mind.]

It was already too late to turn back. Returning to the dining hall, he placed the glass of water and the piece of cake in front of Nephis.

She stared at the cake silently, then looked up and glanced at him.

…Her serious eyes were way too tantalizing.

'Crap.'

This whole situation was wrong. Why wasn't she wearing her armor? Had she destroyed her armor again?! Is that why she was wearing a dress today?

Was the Memory she wanted to commission an armor? Then he had to finish the commission as fast as possible!

On the other hand…

Really…

It wouldn't hurt to take his time with it. Would it?

He wouldn't want to make anything less than flawless, if it was for Nephis.

Keeping his expression neutral, Sunny sat down across from her and said with a polite smile:

"You probably haven't heard that our cafe is famous for its desserts…"

Of course, she hadn't. Because it wasn't.

But then again, Nephis had made him dessert once.

So it was only fair for him to return the favor, right?

Chapter-1689: Satisfactory Answer

Nephis was surprised to see a piece of cake in front of her. The cake was placed on a beautiful porcelain plate, and even had a fresh cherry on top… it was not like she had never seen one before, but desserts weren't exactly a mainstay of her diet.

'Right. It's a café, as well.'

She picked up a small silver spoon and tasted the cake, simply to not seem impolite.

'I wonder if he is really capable of forging a Memory that would not lose to those created by Valor… huh… wait... why is it so tasty?'

Placing the spoon down, she looked at the handsome shopkeeper and remained silent for a moment. Eventually, Nephis said:

"It seems that you have already recognized me, Master Sunless. I'll be straight, then… I need a Memory forged, and a potent one at that. Saint Cassia informed me that you are a talented enchanter who is only unknown because you prefer to keep your talents hidden. I can understand why, and it even makes things easier. But are you really good enough to satisfy the needs of someone as powerful as me?"

The young enchanter looked at her, a strange expression appearing on his charming face for a moment.

Was he, perhaps, stumped by her question and felt insecure about his talent? Creating a Memory for one of the most renowned Saints in the world was not an easy task, after all.

Master Sunless coughed and briefly looked away. Seeing that subtly bashful expression of his… made Nephis understand why this cafe

was so famous.

Needless to say, it was probably not because of desserts.

[Cassie… what the hell?]

Cassie's pleasant voice resounded in her head a moment later:

[What?]

Nephis kept her expression neutral.

[Why is this enchanter you found so… so…]

Cassie answered innocently:

[So what?]

Nephis sighed.

[...Never mind.]

It was a silly question, anyway. She had just been startled a little.

Master Sunless, meanwhile, seemed to find his confidence again and answered with a faint smile:

"I can promise that you'll be satisfied, Lady Nephis."

His eye suddenly twitched, for some reason. The poor man must have been nervous… Nephis knew that meeting her had that effect on many people.

The enchanter continued in the same pleasant tone:

"...Let me rephrase that. What I mean to say is that the Memories I create are top-notch. That said, can I ask you a question?"

Nephis wanted to answer that he could, but suddenly found herself unable to.

That was because, at some point in time, another bite of the delicious cake found its way into her mouth. She didn't even notice how.

It was very strange.

'Is my blood sugar low? Yeah. That must be it.'

Pulling the spoon out of her mouth slowly, she nodded with a deadpan expression.

Master Sunless hesitated for a moment.

"You are a princess of the Great Clan Valor. Surely, the renowned forgemasters of your clan have no shortage of powerful Memories they've created. Why come to me?"

Nephis shrugged, not seeing a reason to hide the truth.

"It is precisely because you are not a forgemaster of Clan Valor."

The young man seemed to have a keen mind. He understood what she meant instantly, and leaned back with a hint of amusement gleaming in the depths of his onyx eyes

"I see."

Master Sunless remained silent for a few moments, thinking about something. Finally, he asked:

"What kind of Memory do you wish to commission?"

Nephis answered in an even tone:

"A sword."

She needed a sword.

The one she wielded, Kinslayer… was a beautiful weapon. It was an immensely powerful weapon, as well, and one that suited her well. Nephis had slain numerous Nightmare Creatures with its sharp edge, and had won countless battles while wielding it.

But Anvil of Valor had branded the Kinslayer, and so, it did not really belong to her anymore.

She wasn't foolish enough to try cutting the King of Swords down

with one of his own blades.

This time, the charming enchanter remained silent for a while, studying her face with a strange intensity.

Nephis could feel his desires faintly… they were subdued, as if something was obscuring them, but she discerned a volatile mixture of hopes smoldering beautifully somewhere deep in his soul.

It reminded her of the King of Swords, a little, maybe because both of them were spellsmiths.

It vaguely reminded her of someone else, as well…

In any case, Master Sunless seemed to be sincere enough, and held no malice toward her. On the contrary, he appeared to have been inspired by her… a little bit too much.

Inwardly, Nephis was surprised.

'Is he… smitten by me?'

She couldn't be sure, but something like that would not be an unfamiliar situation. Being a Saint meant having a strong effect on people, and it was especially true for her.

That said, at least Master Sunless had enough decorum and composure to hide his feelings. They didn't seem to be of the distasteful kind, either, although there was such an element, as well. Of course, there was.

'He's a healthy man, after all.'

Accustomed to such things, Nephis did not hold it against him.

In fact… she might have felt a tiny bit… pleased with that reaction.

'It seems my soul is recovering faster, this time?'

Feeling anything was already a good sign.

Eventually, Master Sunless spoke:

"If that is the case, then there are three ways for me to make a sword for you, Lady Nephis."

She tilted her head slightly.

"Oh?"

He nodded.

"The first way is the most straightforward. I can take an already existing Memory and alter it to fit your needs. That method is the easiest, but also the most limited."

Nephis raised an eyebrow.

Cassie had not told her that Master Sunless was proficient enough to alter Memories granted to Awakened by the Spell, not just create his own. Even among the enchanters of Valor, that was a rare skill… in fact, she didn't know anyone except for Anvil himself who was capable of that feat.

And the young enchanter called it the easiest.

The charming young man, meanwhile, continued:

"The second way is to create a Memory from scratch. That would take longer, and would require me to use both suitably potent materials and soul shards of a high Rank. Of course, the result would be much more lethal. Your current weapon, the Kinslayer… I am confident that I can forge something just as deadly, given enough time."

Nephis was impressed. Her sword was a Transcendent Memory of the Seventh Tier, and an exceptionally powerful one at that. Strangely enough, it was as powerful as many Supreme weapons were… but, of course, Master Sunless would not know that. While the name of her sword and its Rank were well known, very few people had detailed information about it.

It was more or less a military secret.

Still, it was quite remarkable for an Ascended to be confident in creating a top-tier Transcendent weapon.

It seemed that he was supremely competent in his craft.

Being one herself, Nephis liked competent people.

"What is the third way?"

He smiled softly.

"The third way is the longest, and the hardest as well. It would require a lot of effort… from both of us, actually, not just from me. We will also have to spend a lot of time together. But if I succeed, the resulting Memory will be truly powerful."

Nephis took a sip of cold water, suddenly feeling invigorated.

She lingered for a moment, then asked evenly.

"How powerful, exactly?"

Master Sunless looked at her seriously, his smile dimming.

After a short pause, he said with a hint of sober ambition in his pleasantly melodious voice:

"...Powerful enough to kill a god, I'd say."

Chapter-1690: A Blade to Slay the Gods

Understandably, Nephis seemed doubtful of Sunny's outrageous claim. She looked at him silently for a few moments, then raised an eyebrow.

"But you are merely an Ascended… forgive me for being blunt. How can an Ascended create something that powerful?"

Sunny could see how she would question his ability to keep such a promise. However, he meant what he had said. Because he had been thinking of a way to achieve something like that for a long, long time.

He lingered for a moment, then sighed.

"It's easier than you think… not that any random Ascended would be able to, of course. But my way of creating Memories is rather unique, so I can do more than most. It… would be easier for me to show you. Would you mind following me?"

Nephis did not move, looking at him intently.

"I don't mind following, Master Sunless. But not yet."

He frowned a little.

"Not yet?"

She nodded slowly, her face still and motionless.

Her voice sounded even:

"Yes. I…"

Nephis paused for a moment, then added stoically:

"Haven't finished my cake yet."

Sunny thought that he had heard her wrong.

'What?'

He blinked. But Nephis ignored his confused stare, picked up her spoon elegantly, and turned her attention to the piece of cherry cake.

She ate it unhurriedly, maintaining a composed expression. He couldn't tell if she enjoyed the taste or was simply reluctant to waste food. A couple of minutes later, Nephis put her spoon down, wiped her lips with a napkin, and nodded courteously.

"Thank you. How much do I owe you?"

Sunny slowly shook his head.

"No, no. It's… on the house."

What was going on in that head of hers? They had been talking about killing gods, and then paused… for cake?

Not that Sunny was complaining.

In fact, he would have enjoyed watching her eat an entire cake instead of just a small piece, if she wanted to.

Ten cakes, even... although that would be a bit costly...

"Shall we go, then?"

He stood up and guided her to the basement of the Marvelous Mimic. Unlike the day he had led Telle of White Feather to retrieve the [Belated Apology], though, Sunny headed for the back of the boutique.

Nephis followed him, looking around with a hint of curiosity. He explained helpfully:

"This is the Memory Boutique part of the Brilliant Emporium. As you

might know, I don't advertise my ability to craft Memories, so most of the customers think of me as a merchant with a wide network of connections. They peruse our inventory here or commission us to search for a Memory that fits a set of custom parameters."

Nephis nodded.

"The interior is very tasteful. It suits you well."

'Huh?'

Sunny was not sure what she meant, but smiled in appreciation.

"Thank you. Most customers only ever see the boutique, but it's actually just the front side of the business. My workshop is beyond that door over there. And beyond this door is where I keep valuable materials."

As Sunny was opening the door, Nephis asked in her usual even tone:

"Can I ask why you are so reluctant to reveal your talent, Master Sunless?"

He lingered for a moment.

"You certainly can. There are many reasons, but mainly… I just don't like the great clans. Please don't take offense, Lady Nephis."

She smiled faintly.

"I won't."

Sunny led her into the material storage, which was a vast hall drowning in darkness, with only a few lanterns illuminating its expanse. The lanterns were there for Aiko, who sometimes assisted him in crafting.

Nephis paused at the entrance.

The material storage was very different from the refined shopfront. The atmosphere here was cold and ominous… sinister, even. That was because it was full of monstrous remains, most of them

belonging to truly harrowing Nightmare Creatures.

There were grotesque bones, hollowed-out carapaces of vile abominations, and odd artifacts of all kinds. The remains of the Winter Beast were here. Shards of frozen shadows were here, too, among other trophies Sunny had collected in the past four years.

He walked to the middle of the vast underground storage and turned to Nephis, pointing around.

"A powerful Memory has to be crafted from potent materials — otherwise, it won't survive the burden of its own enchantments. The remains of Nightmare Creatures are the most easily accessible source of such materials, albeit not the only source."

Nephis looked around with subdued interest.

"...Have you chanced upon the remains of an Unholy abomination, then? Is that what gives you the confidence to claim that you can forge a godslaying sword?"

Sunny smiled and shook his head.

"No. Actually, what I wanted to show you is not the materials, but rather the storage itself. Have you noticed how large it is?"

Nephis nodded slowly, prompting Sunny to smile.

"Saint Cassia must have informed you that my shop is actually an Ascended Devil. In fact, the volume of its interior… seems a bit too vast, doesn't it?"

She lingered for a bit, then shrugged.

"It is hard to say without knowing what creature you killed to receive this Echo. But yes, I would have expected it to be much smaller. Dimensional storage Memories of the Ascended Rank are usually much more modest."

Sunny pointed at himself.

"But, you see, this dimensional storage is a bit unique. Because its

volume does not depend on the creature's Rank and Class, but rather on the potency of the creature's master's soul. Which, in this case, would be my soul."

Nephis remained silent for a moment.

"It seems that you have an unusually potent soul, then."

He chuckled, causing a small smile to appear on her lips.

"Thank you for the compliment. That is not the point, though."

She frowned, then suddenly pierced him with an intense gaze.

"Do you mean to say…"

Sunny nodded.

"Indeed. It is not impossible for me to create a Memory that is bound to its wielder's soul, and is thus as powerful as the wielder is. You strike me as someone who will continue to grow stronger, Lady Nephis. So, it is not impossible for your sword to become sharp enough to slay a god, one day."

Sunny was being a little dishonest... but only a little.

In truth, his ambition was not to replicate the enchantments of the Covetous Coffer. What he was after, and had been trying to achieve for a while now, was to replicate the [Bound] trait of the Onyx Mantle, which was responsible for that Attribute of his being as potent as his soul was.

The reason for that was the shift in his perception of power, and his views of Memories, after becoming Transcendent. Sunny had long realized that truly powerful beings did not pursue greater power from the weapons they wielded and the tools they used — because they themselves were the power. The weapons and the tools were only meant to channel their own strength, not be a source of external might.

And yet, it had always been the opposite for Sunny. He had made himself into a lethal warrior, yes, but most of his victories came from

cleverly using the enchantments of his powerful Memories, which he could utilize better than other Awakened due to his eyes having been altered by Blood Weave.

Being banished from the Spell, he had lost most of these Memories. That had shown him, in a rather cruel manner, the difference between internal and external power.

So, even though Sunny could craft himself a diverse arsenal of potent Memories, he had not done so. Because he was powerful enough to not need it, and did not wish to be led astray by excessive reliance on undeserved strength. He would rather achieve such strength himself.

That way, he would be following in the footsteps of those who were truly divine.

So, the only Memories Sunny wanted to craft for himself were those that would help him channel his own power better, or provide simple convenience. He also wanted these Memories to be able to keep up with his progress.

Therefore… he had to master the [Bound] enchantment.

The problem was that forging a Memory that possessed such a trait was not easy, since it had to be intricately tied to one's very soul.

…But it would be different if Nephis and her soul flame, as well as the Crown of Dawn, were there to help him.

Chapter-1691: Skill Issue

Nephis remained silent for a while, considering what the charming enchanter had said.

A weapon that was as powerful as its wielder was…

Slowly, white sparks ignited in the depths of her eyes.

'A growing Memory.'

They did exist, but were exceedingly rare. Most of the ones she heard of had not even been received from slaying Nightmare Creatures, but were instead Aspect Legacy Relics.

Having a sword that would allow her to fully express the power of her Aspect was already exciting enough. But if that sword could also reflect her power as a Transcendent Titan, and one who had inherited the lineage of Sun God as well…

Such a blade would indeed be worthy of slaying gods.

As long as Nephis was worthy.

She glanced at Master Sunless, who remained calm and composed. Was he really capable of forging such a Memory?

Suddenly, the young man seemed to possess a different kind of allure in her eyes.

'He's precious... a precious resource, I mean. Cassie has really outdone herself this time.'

If what he had said was true.

Nephis hesitated for a moment.

"Can you really do it?"

Master Sunless gave her an electric smile.

"I haven't done it before, but I am confident that it can be achieved. It might be that nobody else is capable, but I am."

She raised an eyebrow, finding it hard to distrust his confidence. Not just because it was hard to imagine someone who looked like him being dishonest, but also because she could vaguely sense his passion.

Nephis had no doubt that Master Sunless was an inspired artisan. She was familiar with artistic ambition, and his was of the kind that could produce miracles.

Of course, he could simply be delusional. But Cassie would not have sent her here if there was any doubt about his ability.

How had Valor failed to scout this talent?

She looked away, studying the abominable remains surrounding them. It was quite a collection… since the charming young man did not seem like much of a fighter, he must have procured these material with soul shards and coin. That alone spoke volumes of his dedication.

Nephis sighed.

"How are you so different from all the other enchanters?"

He smiled.

"It is simple, really. Have you read the Exploration Report of the Tomb of Ariel?"

Master Sunless suddenly fell silent, and then paled a little.

In quite an endearing way.

"Oh… I am deeply sorry, Lady Nephis. I said something stupid. You were there yourself."

He shifted from one foot to another, trying to hide his embarrassment.

"...In any case, you must be familiar with the cult of the Nightmare Spell mentioned in the report. There used to be sorcerers of a very special kind among those cultists, called weavers."

Nephis nodded.

"Indeed. So?"

The young enchanter hesitated for a moment.

"Every person creating Memories today is capable of doing so because of their Aspect. In truth, they aren't the ones who are making the Memories… it's the Nightmare Spell who does it for them."

He pointed to one of his onyx eyes.

"But I am different. Due to one of my Attributes, I possess the ability to see the sorcerous weave of Memories. And since I can see it, I can strive to understand it. So, my Memories are not the product of a symbiotic fusion between my Aspect and the Nightmare Spell. They are a product of skill. My skill, which I have bitterly honed and improved upon for many years."

Nephis listened to his words intently. What she heard… was rather wondrous.

It was a good reminder to never underestimate people. This humble young man did not seem outstanding when compared to thousands of other Masters and the exalted Saints. He lived his life quietly, away from the spotlight, and lacking fame.

And yet, he too was a singular existence. In his unique craft, there was no one more accomplished.

There were an infinite number of Attributes, Aspects, and Memories out there. Anyone could be a wonder in their own way, and be capable of things that everyone else would think impossible.

Nephis made a decision.

'I'll trust in his skill.'

There was no downside to trusting the charming enchanter, anyway. Even if he failed, Nephis would simply be back to where she had started — lacking a weapon to face the Sovereigns, but having no other choice.

She suddenly found herself responding to his slight smile with one of her own.

"In that case, I commend your ingenuity and persistence, Master Sunless."

Nephis lingered for a moment, then asked:

"You mentioned that creating such a sword would require a lot of effort from both of us, and that we would have to spend a long time together. What did you mean?"

He sighed, then gestured for her to leave the ominous storage room. As they passed the elegant shopfront of the Memory boutique and returned to the dining hall of the café, the charming young man explained in a pleasant tone:

"The first part is easier to answer. In short, I will need your assistance at certain stages of forging. It is no secret that your flames are born from the soul, Lady Nephis… so, I'm inclined to believe that they are most suitable for forging a soulbound weapon."

He remained silent for a moment, then continued hesitantly:

"The second part is more… sensitive. Usually, I don't have much problem selecting suitable enchantments for the Memories I create. But this one will be rather special, and so, it must fit you and your powers perfectly. Such a fit won't be possible unless I have a deep understanding of your powers and how you conduct yourself in battle.

It would be very helpful for me to observe your swordsmanship, and your Aspect, closely… and not just in a sparring ring."

Nephis gave him a curious look.

"Are you very knowledgeable about swordsmanship, Master Sunless?"

The charming young man smiled.

"Well… I might not look it, but I do indeed know a thing or two about swordsmanship. As well as how to wield other weapons. After all, if one wants to forge a weapon, they have to know how to wield one, don't they?"

He paused for a moment, looked around, and then said with a hint of badly hidden pride in his voice:

"Actually… I don't want to brag, but... I once placed very high in the Dreamscape tournament."

Nephis blinked.

'The… Dreamscape tournament?'

That illusory game?

Suddenly, she felt a very unfamiliar emotion rise in her cold and scorched heart.

The contrast between the shy pride written all over the charming enchanter's beautiful face and the sheer silliness of the thing he was so proud of… was… was so…

'Cute.'

Nephis had to look away.

"Ah. I see… how remarkable. Well, in that case, we can arrange something."

With that, she took a deep breath and headed for the door.

"It's getting late, and I need to return to the castle. We will be in touch. Oh… and thank you for the cake, Master Sunless. It was delicious."

He seemed a little startled.

"It was? Alright. I'll be waiting, then. Goodnight, Lady Nephis!"

The silver bell rang melodiously as she left.

Walking outside, Nephis felt the cool wind caress her cheeks. She kept her expression neutral as she headed toward the ferry to the castle.

[Well, what do you think?]

Cassie's voice resounded in her head a moment later.

Nephis contemplated for a few moments.

[I like what I saw. Even if he fails to forge a worthy sword for me, we should work on recruiting him as a Memory master for the Fire Keepers.]

Cassie remained silent for a bit.

[...You liked what you saw, huh?]

Nephis did not deign to reply. Why was Cassie acting so mischievously these days?

Well… actually, she was glad to see her friend coming back to a semblance of normalcy. Although very few people noticed, Cassie had not been doing well for the last few years. It was a good sign if she was in the mood to joke around.

Nephis felt relived.

Just as she thought that, though, her friend suddenly spoke again:

[But, Neph… I have a little piece of advice. You know, just something to think about. The next time you meet a young man and like what you see… maybe don't start the conversation by demanding to know if he can "satisfy your needs". You might give him the wrong idea...]

Nephis frowned.

'What is she talking about? Satisfy my…'

She thought back to her conversation with Master Sunless and froze.

Suddenly... the wind did not feel so cool anymore.

Blushing deeply, Nephis covered her face and walked away.

Her steps might have been a little hurried.

Chapter-1692: Return Customer

Back in the Brilliant Emporium, Sunny was standing motionlessly in the middle of the dining hall. His face was frozen.

The streets of Bastion had long turned dark, and he was enveloped by a peaceful silence.

Some time later, he looked down and stared at the gloomy shadow.

'I… did not imagine the whole thing, did I?'

The shadow stared at him back and shrugged. Nevertheless, it seemed strangely elated.

'Maybe?'

No… Nephis had definitely been here just now. Her plate was still on the table, and her glass was still mostly full of water.

Not only had she been here, but Sunny was now apparently making a soulbound sword for her.

Slowly, his face paled.

'...What did I do?!'

It all seemed perfectly reasonable and cunning in the moment. Not only would he be able to fulfill his ambition of replicating the [Bound] enchantment with Neph's help, but she would also reveal the secrets of her Transcendent battle art to him, completely of her own volition.

Not to mention the hefty sum he would earn for the commission.

But now, Sunny was panicking!

Why did he insist on spending lots of time with her? That was the exact opposite of what the humble shopkeeper was supposed to do! His only task was to stay as far away from Nephis as possible and live a tranquil, peaceful life.

And now, in the span of just a few days, Sunny ended up being entangled with Nephis and Cassie both. Somehow.

'This wasn't a part of the plan!'

But it was also... not that bad?

Despite how contrary to his plans the current situation was, Sunny found himself smiling.

In fact, despite his panic, he was just as elated as the gloomy shadow.

Too much so, even, to the point that his second avatar was currently humming a happy melody in Ravenheart... which made Rain stare at him weirdly.

Sunny abruptly stopped humming.

'...Crap.'

He had done did it now!

***

The next day, Sunny informed somewhat sleepy Aiko that Changing Star had visited the shop late in the evening to commission a Memory.

The petite girl just stared at him for a moment and then asked, her voice gruff:

"Oh, yeah? Who else came in? Was it Santa Claus?"

Hearing the unfamiliar name, Sunny frowned.

"Saint Claus? Who is that? Is there a new Transcendent in the Sword Domain?"

Aiko just shook her head and looked away.

"Never mind. So, you're telling me that both Cassie and Changing Star herself have visited the Brilliant Emporium, but both waited until I was gone to spend some time with you alone. Am I getting this correctly?"

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

"I mean, that is a strange way of putting it, but yes. That is basically it."

She nodded.

"Sure. Why not? I shouldn't be surprised, really."

By that point, Sunny was starting to get offended.

"What's the matter? I thought you would be happy! We'll get a pile of soul shards soon!"

Aiko yawned.

"Yeah... that's great. Don't forget to give me a fat bonus, then."

Her tone told him to leave her alone, but Sunny was not willing to.

"It's true! She even complimented my cake!"

The petite girl silently floated up to the ceiling. He stared at her in confusion.

"What are you doing?"

Aiko responded sarcastically:

"Checking the liquor. I just made an inventory yesterday, so don't think I'll fail to find out how much you guzzled after I left…"

Sunny threw his arms up.

"Is this how you talk to your boss?!"

She scoffed.

"I apologize. Don't think I'll fail to find out how much you guzzled after I left, boss."

Shaking his head, he mumbled a few curses and went about getting ready for the morning customers.

A few days passed in idle tranquility. There was not much happening in the Brilliant Emporium, so Sunny simply waited to be contacted by the Fire Keepers.

Funnily enough, the Lord of Shadows was in the same situation. The elders of clan Valor were taking their sweet time discussing how to negotiate with him, so he had nothing better to do than wait.

Only the avatar in Ravenheart was busy, since he and Rain were in the initial stages of planning a hunt for the Awakened abomination.

A few more days passed, and then, Sunny was distracted by the sound of plates rolling in the dining hall. Looking up from the stove, he wiped his hands and went to check what had happened.

When he left the kitchen, what met him was the sight of Aiko having planted face-first into the floor. There was a new customer standing at the entrance, sunlight pouring over her shoulders and illuminating her slender figure.

The customers were staring at her in silent awe.

Nephis, meanwhile, looked down with a hint of bewilderment in her eyes:

"Aiko… are you alright?"

She was wearing civilian clothes once again, this time having replaced the criminal summer dress with fashionable white trousers and a fitted black blouse.

The petite girl mumbled a stifled curse and slowly picked herself off the floor.

"Ah, yes… I'm perfectly fine, Lady Nephis. Uh… what brings you here?"

Sunny had the same question. He had expected for Cassie to summon him telepathically, or maybe one of the Fire Keepers arrive to hand him an invitation. The fact that Nephis arrived personally was rather strange. Did she have a lot of free time?

As a matter of fact... she probably did, waiting for the elders of clan Valor to make a decision. The same way the Lord of Shadows was waiting. But that still did not explain why she had come to the Brilliant Emporium.

Secretly stumped, Sunny walked over and, made sure that Nephis could not see, and gave Aiko a smug look.

Then, he turned away with a pleasant expression.

"Welcome, welcome. I didn't expect you to visit our establishment again so soon, my lady."

Nephis remained silent for a few moments, then said neutrally:

"I'm here to continue the discussion we started last time. Oh, and…"

Her expression remained stoic.

"I'm a bit parched. Would you mind serving me some tea? And something to go along with it… cake will do fine…"

Sunny's smile wavered for a moment.

He sighed.

"I'm afraid we don't have cake at the moment. But!"

His chin rose a little.

"I've been told that my waffles are to die for. Please have a seat… I'll be with you shortly."

Chapter-1693: Convincing Lie

Very soon, Sunny personally delivered a portion of his nearly immaculate waffles to Nephis, complete with a scoop of vanilla ice cream and some freshly cut strawberries.

'I think I've outdone myself this time! if I do say so myself…'

He was in a great mood. Sunny wasn't sure what had come over him, but he was especially inspired today while making the waffles. It almost felt like he was on the verge of breaking through the bottleneck of his culinary skill.

Perhaps the missing ingredient was not the waffles themselves, but the customer for whom he was making them?

Contemplating these profound issues, he sat across from Nephis and smiled.

She wasn't wearing that clumsy disguise of hers today, so he could enjoy the sight of her lustrous silver locks. The few customers present in the dining hall were frozen in stunned awe, the name Changing Star ready to fall from their lips. Sunlight seemed especially radiant in her presence, bathing the Brilliant Emporium in a warm glow.

Sunny felt his heartbeat quickening.

Nephis spared him a short glance, then looked away to take a sip of tea. Finally, she picked up the fork and took a small bite of the waffle with an aloof expression.

'She won't even look at me. Well, makes sense. Why would she?'

Unlike Sunny, who couldn't help stealing glances at Nephis, she was probably preoccupied with different thoughts.

He sighed.

"I can't help but notice that you are not hiding your identity anymore, Lady Nephis. I was under the assumption that you wanted to keep the commission secret, though. What changed?"

She put the fork down, gave the waffles a strange stare, and then finally faced him.

"I still do. However, plans had to change due to our last conversation. Considering that we will have to spend a lot of time together, trying to hide our connection from Valor is not an option. They'll discover a new person in my immediate circle sooner than later... so, we will have to resort to a bit of misdirection, instead."

A subtle smile touched her lips.

"Congratulations, Master Sunless. You are now the official Memory Purveyor of the Fire Keepers — an independent specialist we've hired to handle sales and acquisitions of sorcerous equipment. Of course, you will receive a generous commission for every deal you facilitate… which will pay for the actual commission."

As Sunny froze, unable to speak, she studied his face for a few moments and then returned to the waffles with a small, but seemingly pleased smile.

'...Goddamn! We've struck it rich, Aiko!'

Signing an official contract with the Fire Keepers was not much different from receiving a government tender. The Memory Boutique side of the Brilliant Emporium was about to explode in revenue… all of that simply to bury the exchange of soul shards for the actual work Sunny was being hired to do.

'Very crafty.'

It was Cassie who had come up with that scheme, without a doubt.

However… something still did not make sense.

He frowned slightly.

"That is great news, and I am definitely delighted to hear it. But, my lady… even so, isn't it a little bit too strange for you to deliver the news personally? Surely, sending one of your subordinates would have been much more in line with such an arrangement."

Nephis was an exalted existence even among Saints. She would have never had to deal with something as mundane as hiring a procurement specialist personally. So, there was an obvious contradiction between her intention to create a cover for him and her actions, which only served to blow it.

She remained silent for a while, savoring her tea and dessert — or pretending to savor them, most likely. It was hard to tell from her expression if she was really enjoying the taste of what Sunny had cooked... which, honestly speaking, was a little heartbreaking.

But that was how Nephis was. She had never really had a sweet tooth.

Still, her acting skills must have improved tremendously in the past four years. Her pretense of being engrossed in his waffles was incredibly convincing. Sunny wasn't sure that he could have put on such a performance himself.

Eventually, she put the fork down with a masterfully acted out hint of reluctance.

"Huh? Oh. You are correct, but that would not have solved the problem. You and I are going to be seen together often, after all, and there needs to be an explanation. So, I am here to sow the seeds of that explanation. The Memory Purveyor position is an intentionally flimsy misdirection — no one would really buy it, considering the circumstances."

Nephis paused for a moment.

"So, there will be a deeper layer of deception hidden beneath it."

Sunny smiled.

"A double misdirection?"

She smiled faintly in response and nodded.

"Once someone becomes suspicious of your official position and digs deeper, they'll discover the prepared explanation and come to a false conclusion, thinking that they've discovered the truth. Not knowing that what they've discovered is actually another, more convincing lie."

'Definitely Cassie's idea.'

Sunny tilted his head a little.

"And that more convincing lie is…"

Nephis shifted a little.

"Well. I mean no offense, Master Sunless, but nothing about your background suggests that you are worthy of my attention. However… how do I say this... you must have looked in the mirror. What do you think people will assume when they see me keeping someone like that by my side?"

He blinked a couple of times, confused.

"Actually... I avoid mirrors. I'm sorry, Lady Nephis, but I don't quite understand what you mean."

Strangely enough, Nephis… seemed stumped.

She remained silent for a while, then took a sip of tea.

Then, she cleared her throat.

"What I mean to say... is that people will assume that I am infatuated with you. That I've arranged for you to have a position with the Fire Keepers because you are my paramour. So, I am here today to plant the seeds of that impression… Master Sunless."

'A… paramour…'

Sunny froze.

He was suddenly happy that he had not brought himself a cup of tea, as well, because he would have definitely spat it all out at that moment.

The implications of what Nephis had said slowly seeped into his mind.

It wasn't that outrageous… on the contrary, it was an ingenious lie that would perfectly explain why the two of them were spending time together. People loved nothing more than salacious rumors, after all.

But, still…

'What she's trying to say is that my cover… will be… that I'm her boy toy?!'

Sunny was mortified.

…But also, intrigued.

But also mortified.

The mix of emotions must have been apparent on his face, because Nephis suddenly picked up her cup, looked away, and said evenly:

"It is just for the sake of deception, of course. I'll understand if you're uncomfortable with this arrangement."

Sunny slowly shook his head and forced out a pale smile:

"I'm… I'm not… uncomfortable."

She looked at him with a hint of concern.

"Are you sure? Come to think of it… I didn't even ask if you have a partner. I wouldn't want for your girlfriend to misunderstand…"

Sunny's smile grew brittle.

"I am sure… and there's no one like that. This arrangement works, for me. I think it's a splendid idea… very deceptive…"

Internally, though, he was imploding.

[Saint Cassia… care to explain yourself?!]

Chapter-1694: Facing the Consequences

Cassie did not answer. Perhaps she wasn't in the mood to waste essence to hijack his senses, or perhaps she simply did not want to...

In any case, after that bombshell of a revelation, Sunny sat quietly and stared into the distance for a while.

He was trying to understand how he had ended up in this situation.

It was all his fault, of course… really, Sunny had no one but himself to blame. Had he not suggested creating a soulbound Memory for Nephis on the spur of the moment, there would have been no need for them to interact, let alone do so while hiding the real reason from Clan Valor.

The Lord of Shadows would have continued to play his role as her battle partner, while the humble shopkeeper would have continued living his mostly peaceful life in solitude.

But now…

'I'm going to be a kept man… gods, why am I so handsome?!'

That pretty face of his... was a curse!

If Sunny had a more rugged appearance, Cassie would have had to come up with a different explanation for his presence near Nephis. The Lord of Shadows, who always wore a ferocious mask, received nothing but respect… but when Sunny showed his face, the most people could believe was that he had caught the princess's fancy due to his pleasing looks.

Surely, being a Saint and ruling a Citadel in a Death Zone had

nothing to do with the difference in treatment...

'I can't believe it.'

Jet had once told Sunny that he could become a flower boy one day. Who knew that her words would not only come true, but also come back to bite him one day?

He glanced at Nephis furtively.

She was finishing her waffles with a calm expression, seemingly not affected by the sensitive nature of their conversation at all. There was no hint of agitation or embarrassment on her beautiful face, and her posture remained graceful and poised, like always.

Well, it made sense. It was nothing but a strategy of deception for her, after all. She did not know Sunny, and only saw him as a valuable resource. A talented enchanter who could create a powerful Memory for her to use.

But it was different for Sunny.

Because, to him, she meant so much more.

Throwing another glance at her, he sighed and leaned back in his chair.

'What happened happened. There's no point in worrying about it now.'

In fact… he should just accept the situation and allow himself to enjoy it. Sunny would have lied if he said that he didn't feel a little bit excited about the whole situation.

After all, if Nephis was calm, then why couldn't he be calm, as well?

***

'He's looking at me… what do I do… should I… he's looking at me again!'

Pretending to be nonchalant, Nephis tried to concentrate on the

stunningly delicious waffles that Master Sunless had made for her and not show any sign of her distress.

She didn't quite understand how she had allowed Cassie to convince her to go with this plan.

When they discussed how to go about allowing the charming enchanter to stay close to her without alerting Clan Valor to the true purpose of the arrangement, the idea seemed quite reasonable. Strategically, it was sound.

There was even the added benefit of shielding Nephis from the pursuits of the prospective bachelors from other Legacy clans… somewhat.

It was only this morning that she had gotten cold feet. Knowing herself, Nephis had rehearsed the conversation in her room… extensively… and finally realized how deeply embarrassing it would be to say something like that to the charming young man's face.

Nevertheless, she had gone through with it. She was not someone to back down from a challenge, after all.

But now, she had to face the consequences.

'Ah… he looked so put-upon…'

Well, why wouldn't he? Despite his alluring looks, Master Sunless was an incredibly talented craftsman, first and foremost. He must have taken a lot of pride in his skill. To be reduced to such a role… had to be extremely humiliating, from his point of view.

Yet, he graciously accepted their scheme without voicing any complaints.

Being involved in all the lies and deceit surrounding the royal family of the Sword Domain could not have been easy for a decent and honest person like him, either. Nephis was starting to understand better why such a talented sorcerer had chosen to stay away from the Great Clans.

She felt... a little guilty.

When her plate became empty, she sighed with regret and looked at Master Sunless.

'I should protect him well.'

There was no choice now but to proceed with the plan, now.

"If you are ready, we should go to the Castle."

The charming young man seemed a little startled.

"Go to the Castle? Right now?"

Having calmed down somewhat, Nephis nodded.

"Yes. We need to sign the contract officially. Apart from that, the more people see us together, the better. Don't worry, though — there is no need for you to do anything extra or force yourself to act in any kind of way. As long as we are simply seen together, those who need to get the wrong impression will convince themselves of the falsehood. So, you won't need to compromise your dignity."

She lingered for a moment, and then added in a serious tone:

"You have my promise, Master Sunless."

She meant it.

He looked at her silently for a while, his expression unreadable.

Eventually, the young man nodded:

"Alright. Give me a minute to give instructions to Aiko, and we can go."

He stood up and retreated into the kitchen of the small café, leaving Nephis alone.

She was using a Memory to make it impossible for anyone to eavesdrop on their conversation, but people could still stare. So, she couldn't allow herself to show any sign of losing composure.

…Even though all Nephis wanted to do was slump in her chair and

bury her face in her hands.

And maybe order another serving of those delicious waffles.

[Cassie…]

Her friend's voice resounded in her head a moment later, composed and calming:

[Yes?]

Nephis lingered for a few moments.

[...Prepare the contract.]

There was a little pause, and then Cassie replied neutrally:

[Already done.]

Nephis was a little surprised. She hesitated for a bit, then asked mentally:

[You already did it? But what if he refused?]

Her friend chuckled.

[Why would he refuse? There's an army of men out there who would kill for the opportunity to act as your romantic partner… don't sell yourself short!]

Nephis frowned.

That was true. She was beautiful in her own right… young, wealthy, renowned, and had the backing of a prestigious family.

So, then…

Her frown deepened a little.

'Now, wait a second. So why did he look so put-upon? Who… who does he think…'

Her thoughts, however, were interrupted by Cassie's pleasant voice:

[Oh, I wanted to say something. The way you found out if he has a girlfriend... well done! Very slick.]

Nephis blinked.

'What?'

Then, her eyes widened a little.

A moment later, Master Sunless appeared near her table.

He seemed to have regained his composure. Sparing Nephis a bright smile, the charming young man bowed slightly.

"We can leave... Lady Nephis? Are you alright?"

She took a deep breath.

"Yes... I am fine. Let's just go...."

Chapter-1695: All According to Plan

Leaving an avatar behind to help Aiko in the kitchen, Sunny left the Brilliant Emporium with Nephis.

The avatar did not have the benefit of wearing the Nebulous Mantle, but his Transcendent presence would be safely contained as long as he did not enter the dining hall. Since the entire interior of the Brilliant Emporium was situated in the dimensional storage of the Marvelous Mimic, anyone would find it hard to catch a glimpse of what was happening in the kitchen.

The café would still close for the day as soon as the current customers left, though. When Sunny told Aiko about the contract with the Fire Keepers, she was beyond happy for a few moments… however, pretty soon, they discovered a problem.

Although the real purpose of the Memory Purveyor position was to hide the commission of an enchanted sword for Nephis, that cover still had to be maintained. Which meant that the Brilliant Emporium would really have to handle the sales of the Memories earned by the Fire Keepers, as well as the acquisition of the Memories they wished to purchase.

The problem was that Sunny's reputation as a Memory broker was all a smokescreen, and he did not really possess a network of connections to facilitate such deals. Luckily, Aiko still had some contacts from running the Brilliant Emporium alone in the past — so, she had to come up with a business plan and accomplish a lot of relevant things with utmost haste.

The petite girl seemed daunted by the sudden task, but he could almost see piles of coins reflecting in her eyes.

In any case, that was what was happening to Aiko and the avatar in the Brilliant Emporium.

Sunny himself, meanwhile…

Was accompanying Nephis on a leisurely stroll across Bastion.

He had to admit that they made for quite a pair. Nephis looked elegant and sharp in her crisp civilian clothes, while his attire was refined and tasteful. Sunny noticed that the two of them collected a lot of stares — some people even turned around to watch them go.

Some of them recognized Nephis, some of them didn't.

He felt a little uncomfortable with all that attention, but knew that it was the very reason they were out in the open.

The streets of Bastion were lively at that time of day. Nephis looked around with curiosity, a faint smile playing on her lips. Eventually, she asked:

"Have you lived in Bastion long, Master Sunless?"

He shook his head.

"No… only for about a year."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Where were you before?"

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then shrugged.

"After Antarctica... here and there. I spent some time exploring the wilderness after the Nightmare."

Sunny did not specify which Nightmare he meant, letting Nephis make her own wrong conclusion. There was nothing strange with saying that he had wandered the Dream Realm for years before settling in Bastion, either — it would have been a deadly affair before, but after the Dream Gates were open, there was much more travel between various Citadels.

Both the Sword Domain and the Song Domain were swiftly turning into actual states, as opposed to loose alliances of isolated strongholds. There were all kinds of activities going on in the wilderness of the Dream Realm these days — roads were being constructed, trade routes were being established, fortified relay stations were being constructed, and so on.

As the infrastructure of the Domains was being built at a staggering speed, there was a need for all kinds of people to head into the wilds.

The vast expanse of the Dream Realm — the part of it conquered by humans — was not a place where only warriors could survive anymore. Of course, every team had to be guarded by Awakened escorts, but there were geologists, map-makers, builders, explorers, messengers, merchants, and numerous other specialists traveling across it now.

Nephis most likely assumed that he was a part of a large merchant caravan in the past.

She smiled.

"I've been here… for about three years, I guess. But actually, with how often I am away, the actual number of days I've spent in Bastion won't even account for three months. So, in a sense, you've been living here longer than me."

Her smile grew a little wistful.

"How does it feel, to live in Bastion? On this side of the lake, I mean."

Sunny thought about it for a few moments, then answered in a light tone:

"Well, it's sort of tranquil… for me, at least. There is always something going on, and the city is boiling with activity, but unlike the cities of the waking world, it's less suffocating here. Both literally and metaphorically. The air is clean, and the people are… optimistic about their lives. Back on Earth, everyone spent their days pretending not to know that everything was falling apart.

Here, everyone is working together to build something from the

ground up, instead. It's nice."

He paused, then added somberly:

"Of course, it's not all bliss and sunshine. Most of the people on this side of the lake come from Antarctica, so they are scarred and traumatized. In the worst cases, people reach their breaking point and snap. Crime is not exactly rampant, but it does exist… worse than that, with how many Awakened there are now, the government and the Legacy clans can't police them all effectively anymore.

It is one thing if a mundane person suffers a mental breakdown or succumbs to greed, but if it is an Awakened… well, you can imagine."

Sunny looked at Nephis and smiled sheepishly.

"Sorry… I seem to have spoiled the mood."

She stared at him for a moment, then hurriedly looked away.

"...No, it's alright. It is exactly what I wanted to hear. People like me are tasked with protecting humanity, but, strangely enough, we mostly exist in isolation from the actual people we are meant to protect. So, it is good to learn such things. So that we... don't snap."

They reached the waterfront and followed along the shore of the lake, heading for the distant ferry. This section of the lakeshore was fashioned into a park, and there were a lot of people here, resting on the grass.

Many young couples included.

Sunny suddenly felt a little hot.

He caught himself staring at Nephis, whose profile was contoured by the radiance of the sun, for a moment too long.

"Does it bother you? The isolation?"

She looked at him and wanted to answer, but at that moment, Sunny's eyes suddenly widened.

His expression changed.

'What the hell… not again!'

That was because just then, a powerful tremor shook the Nameless Temple in the distant Godgrave. He was momentarily distracted… and slipped on a wrapper someone had carelessly dropped on the ground.

'This can't be happening… I'm a Saint! A Saint, for the love of gods!'

Why was it that every time he saw Nephis, he ended up tripping over his feet?!

Sunny considered whether he wanted to perform a sudden somersault to regain his footing, but that would look even more ridiculous than falling. Using Shadow Step was out of the question, as well, since that Ability was already known to belong to the Lord of Shadows.

So, he resigned himself and prepared to hit the ground.

A moment later, though…

Nephis took a step forward and wrapped her arm around his waist, gallantly stopping his fall before his back could touch the cobblestones.

Sunny suddenly found himself face-to-face with her, his entire weight effortlessly supported by her strength, staring into her calm grey eyes.

Their bodies were almost pressed against each other.

Looking at him calmly, Nephis asked in an even tone:

"Master Sunless… are you alright?"

Sunny's heart fluttered.

He stared at her silently, his face growing pale.

He… was not alright.

'What the hell is that?! Am I in a romantic drama?! If so… why the hell am I the one being caught?! It's the man's job to catch the pretty female lead!'

Although romance was not his genre of choice, Sunny had consumed a lot of such stories during his years in the outskirts. Back then, he had always mocked the hapless female leads, who always seemed to trip, slip, and fall… right into the arms of the cold and aloof male leads, of course.

He had even suspected that there was something in the water wherever the characters lived, since their coordination seemed nonexistent.

Who knew that he would find himself in the same situation, one day?

And in the wrong role, to boot!

He cleared his throat.

"I am fine now, thanks. You can let me go."

It seemed that Nephis only realized that she was still holding him at that moment.

There were a lot of people staring at them with wide eyes.

She remained silent for a few moments, then smoothly pulled him to his feet, unwrapped her arm from his waist, and touched her hair lightly. Her expression remained perfectly nonchalant.

"I see. That is good."

Sunny straightened the Nebulous Mantle, trying to chase away the memory of her warm touch from his mind.

And failing.

Turning away, he sighed, bent down, and picked up the wrapper. Then, he walked to a nearby trash bin and tossed it inside.

Returning to Nephis, he smiled apologetically.

What was he supposed to say now?

"I... dislike people who litter."

'What was that?!'

She nodded, still looking away.

"Yeah. Let's… hurry to the ferry, now. I think we put on a good enough act, already. Well done."

Sunny blinked.

"Yeah… a good act, right… I thought I'd improvise..."

The two of them continued on their way to the ferry, both keeping quiet. Sunny was too indignant and embarrassed to speak, while Nephis… probably didn't care to.

There was something strange about her, though.

Had her shoulders trembled a few times?

No… it was probably just his imagination.

Chapter-1696: VIP Treatment

Eventually, they reached the pier.

There were six ferries carrying people and cargo across the lake to the Castle, operating in pairs. The one Sunny and Nephis approached was located on the eastern shore, and was meant for passengers.

There was another pair of ferries on the southern side of the lake, in the direction of the Dream Gate, mostly used for transporting cargo. The last pair was on the northern shore, usually used by the Awakened warriors departing on expeditions.

Every time Sunny returned to the waking world, he had to purchase a ticket, wait in line, and then spend some unpleasant time on the crowded passenger deck of the ferry. Most Masters had access to much more comfortable accommodations, but they also had a higher status than him.

Since Sunny did not serve any established power and preferred to remain low-key, the treatment he received was much less glamorous than what an Ascended deserved. He didn't mind it… too much.

Today, however, his experience was entirely different.

Not only did Nephis not bother to buy tickets — which made sense, considering that the enchanted ferry technically belonged to her family — but they were even immediately guided to the luxurious VIP deck. There was no crowd here… in fact, there did not seem to be any other passengers on the smaller deck, at all, at least not yet.

Instead of the crowded standing arrangement, there were soft sofas and tastefully engraved tables. There were even refreshments and beverages provided, served on a separate table.

The deck was situated at the front of the ferry and raised, so nothing

obstructed the beautiful view of the vast lake and the picturesque castle rising from the waters in the distance. A soft breeze blew across the lake, playing with Neph's radiant silver locks.

Sunny enjoyed the view for a few moments, then looked away and inhaled slowly.

They walked to the beautifully laced wooden railing and looked at the sunlit vista. There was some time left before the ferry would depart, so they had nothing to do but wait.

Both were silent, but strangely enough, Sunny did not feel awkward at that moment.

Instead, he felt at peace.

After a while, Nephis suddenly asked:

"Master Sunless… you possess a high affinity to shadows, don't you?"

He nodded slowly.

"I do."

She considered her next words carefully.

"What can you tell me about shadows? And people whose Aspects have to do with them?"

Now, it was his turn to choose words.

After thinking for a bit, Sunny shrugged.

"I can tell you a lot, actually… but also not that much. I am ashamed to say that I don't understand my element well, myself. Which is a bit fitting, if you think about it, considering that Shadow God was also the god of mysteries. Shadows… are a unique concept. Someone considers them to be the opposite of light, but actually, shadows and light are just two sides of the same coin.

One cannot exist without the other. It is true darkness that is their enemy."

He paused for a moment, secretly studying her reaction, and then added:

"Shadows are also intimately tied to souls. In fact, I am not even sure where the soul ends and the shadow begins. There are very few beings out there who can deal damage directly to one's shadow, but if a shadow is hurt, the soul is hurt as well. Granted, things without souls also have shadows… it's all very mysterious."

She remained silent for a while, contemplating his words. Then, she asked neutrally:

"Do you know of any other Awakened with shadow Aspects?"

Sunny hesitated.

"Well… I only ever heard of one."

That seemed to pique her interest.

"Oh?"

Sunny nodded.

"Yes. There was a man who went by the name Shadow Blade Kurt. A really vicious fellow. I heard that he used to handle some truly distasteful tasks for a Legacy clan, back in NQSC… I'm not sure which clan, though."

Nephis raised an eyebrow.

"Used to?"

He smiled somberly.

"Yes. He… was one of those Awakened who couldn't handle their nightmares, overusing stimulants to stay away from the Dream Realm. He eventually lost control and was dealt with by the government. That… was the last anyone had ever heard about Shadow Blade Kurt."

She sighed with a hint disappointment.

"That… doesn't sound like the kind of person I would want to know about. Thank you, though."

Sunny smiled.

"No problem. I'll... go get us something cool to drink."

He walked back to the table with the refreshments and poured them two glasses of light wine.

As he was about to head back, however, Sunny froze for a moment.

'What… is this familiar feeling?'

Suddenly, he had a terrible premonition.

'Oh, no!'

He walked hurriedly toward Nephis, but before he could reach her, a new passenger arrived. She noticed Neph's slender figure, grinned, and walked past him with wide strides.

"Princess!"

Effie hugged Neph around the shoulder with a bright smile.

"When did you return to Bastion? No, wait… you're not leaving right away again, are you?"

Nephis opened her mouth to answer, but Effie gave her no choice:

"Great! Listen…"

She leaned closer and whispered loudly:

"You're still single, aren't you? Well, let me tell you… that won't do! A beauty like you should not just be worshiped by the masses, but also appreciated by a dashing man. The masses won't warm you on a cold and windy night, after all… well, unless you're into that kind of thing…"

Neph's eyes widened.

"Effie…"

The huntress laughed.

"I'm saying all this for a reason. How about... you let me set you up with someone? Princess, I found you a perfect match! He's a young Master here in Bastion. Homeowner, runs a successful business.

None of that tiresome Legacy baggage, either. Oh, he's an amazing cook, as well! Gods, I am starting to salivate just from thinking… oh, and to be clear, I don't mean thinking about the food…"

Neph trembled.

"Effie, wait…"

But Effie just smiled mischievously.

"What? You were the one who told me that you were researching passion. How are you going to learn passion without, you know… getting a little taste of passion? In any case, I saved the best for last. That guy, he's so cute! Ah… if I wasn't a married woman of modest disposition, I would have gobbled him up myself.

He's just… wow. Speak about tasty things! And you can tell that he hides a great body under that apron, as well…"

Nephis grabbed her hand forcefully.

"Effie! Stop talking!"

Effie looked at her in confusion.

Then, her smile slowly froze.

She remained silent for a few moments, and then said in a stifled tone:

"Oh. He… he's standing right behind me, isn't he?"

Chapter-1697: Actionable Strategy

"...He's standing right behind me, isn't he?"

Nephis slowly released Effie's hand, suddenly feeling weak.

It was too late.

'Oh, gods…'

She briefly considered lighting the ferry on fire.

That would resolve the situation, wouldn't it? Yes… she would not have to face Master Sunless, at least. That was an actionable strategy.

But, no… no, she couldn't. The ferry had cast off moments after Effie showed up, which meant that the passengers would have nowhere to escape and drown in case of a fire. It also meant that Nephis, Effie, and Master Sunless were stuck on the VIP deck — just the three of them, with nowhere else to go.

There was no escape.

Nephis barely suppressed a shudder.

'I can summon my wings and flee…'

But that would mean leaving the charming young man alone with Effie. She... was unwilling. No, actually, she was vehemently against it! For some reason.

So, Nephis just stared at the boisterous huntress impassively and said in an even tone:

"Yes. He is."

Effie trembled.

Nephis wanted nothing more than to sigh and hide somewhere.

She had just managed to regain her composure after the… the incident in the park. And now…

'Oh, no! Why did I think about what happened in the park?!'

To her distress, the image of the beautiful enchanter making timid excuses for his clumsiness resurfaced in her mind, and all her composure evaporated.

…The memory of embracing him tightly surfaced next.

At that moment, Nephis did something that she never thought she would do.

Maintaining a nonchalant expression, she took a casual step left and hid behind Effie.

With Effie's robust body hiding Nephis from Master Sunless, she suddenly felt much better.

[Wow. Did you just… heartlessly abandon a friend?]

Cassie's voice made her flinch.

Nephis gritted her teeth.

[I did not! I just… retreated. To support her from the rear.]

Cassie answered with a dubious hum.

Effie, meanwhile, remained motionless for a few moments, and then slowly turned around.

"Oh! Master Sunless. You were here."

Her light-hearted tone sounded a little forced.

Nephis could not see the charming young man from behind the tall huntress, but she could hear his pleasant voice. He answered after a

short delay, maintaining perfect decorum:

"Yes. It is a pleasure to see you, Saint Athena."

With that, he took a step forward and appeared in view, carrying two glasses of wine. Luckily, Nephis had settled down a little, by that point, and was able to meet his gaze calmly.

Master Sunless smiled lightly, then handed her one of the glasses.

"Your wine, my lady."

He hesitated for a moment, then offered the second glass to Effie. The huntress silently took the wine and gulped it down in one go.

"Ah… I see! Has the Brilliant Emporium been contracted to provide catering for the ferry, now? Good job, good job! Valor has deep pockets…"

The charming young man remained silent for a bit, then shook his head subtly.

"No, we are not providing catering for the ferry."

Effie seemed confused.

"Oh? Then how come you are here on the VIP deck? Not that I'm complaining! In fact, it's nice to see a pretty face… a friendly face! I meant to say a friendly face."

Nephis observed their conversation without saying anything, secretly stunned. This… was probably the first time she had seen Effie tongue-tied.

'Amazing.'

Master Sunless was far more formidable than she had thought!

Of course, his advantage was not going to last long. Knowing the vivacious huntress, she was going to double down on her suggestive remarks soon. And if that did not work… well, quadruple down, then!

It was all but impossible to fluster Effie. Anyone she aimed her sights on was doomed to be flustered, instead.

Granted… Nephis wouldn't mind seeing the charming enchanter flustered…

'What am I even thinking about?'

Feeling a little guilty for hanging Effie out to dry… even though the huntress had no one but herself to blame… Nephis decided to clear the air and explain the situation. She would share the news about the Memory Purveyor position first, and then let Cassie explain the more scandalous layer of deception to Effie in private.

After all, if the huntress heard it right now, she would not be able to help herself and tease the poor young man relentlessly. Yes… Nephis had to protect him from her vulgar friend.

Him. Definitely not herself.

She opened her mouth, intending to say something…

But Master Sunless beat her to it.

Walking over, he leaned on the railing beside her…

And gently took her hand.

Nephis froze.

"Well, how do I say this? I am on the VIP deck… because Lady Nephis invited me to be with her on the VIP deck."

Her eyes widened slightly.

Neph's hand was suddenly burning from his soft touch.

'Do not. Spit your wine. Nephis.'

She gulped the wine down and smiled weakly.

"...Right."

'No, but how is his hand so soft?'

Nephis used to have rough, calloused hands… the hands of a swordsman. Later, as her body was fortified and tempered by the Awakening, Ascension, and Transcendence, it rid itself of imperfections. Those calluses were long gone, and her skin was flawless.

And yet, it was nowhere near the smooth silkiness of the beautiful enchanter's hand.

Nephis was unyielding and lived a life that was harsh and full of hardships. So… she wasn't used to soft things.

'...I'm spacing out.'

Luckily, so was Effie.

She stared at the charming young man with her mouth agape, then slowly turned to Nephis. Then, she looked back at Master Sunless.

And then back at Nephis.

Nephis suddenly had a terrible premonition.

'Oh, no.'

Gradually, a wolfish grin appeared on Effie's face.

'Oh, no!'

She giggled.

"Oh! Oh, damn! I see! Wow! Cassie sure works fast…"

The boisterous huntress leaned closer and whispered in an intimate tone:

"Alright. I've already given this one the talk about the birds and the bees…"

Master Sunless, who was looking at Nephis with a prideful expression, as if asking her to praise his act, suddenly tensed.

Effie, meanwhile, patted him on the shoulder.

"So, kids, let Auntie Effie tell you about safety now…"

Maintaining a calm expression, Nephis turned and looked across the lake.

The castle… was so terribly far away.

Chapter-1698: Auntie Effie's Lessons

'I've… made a terrible mistake.'

In hindsight, Sunny should have known that he was digging his own grave. It was just that he did not see Effie often these days, and so, he had forgotten…

That Effie's corrupting influence was just as terrible as the Corruption of the Void itself.

No, was it even more terrible?

In any case, the opportunities to stump the boisterous huntress were too rare! He simply could not pass on the chance to fluster her. More importantly… while Sunny knew that Nephis and Effie were close, Master Sunless had no way of knowing that. So, based on what he was supposed to know, the correct course of action had to be furthering the agreed-upon deception.

Therefore, Sunny passed the wine to Nephis.

And then took her hand.

Why did he do that?

Well, simply put… because he could.

If there was an opportunity to hold Neph's hand, why would he not? Effie had accidentally provided him with a convenient reason, as well. It was all working out great…

Sunny had promised himself to enjoy the odd situation, and he was going to enjoy it as much as he could.

…Neph's hand felt soft and cool in his grasp.

He remained comparatively calm. That was not the first time the two of them held hands, after all, so there was no reason for him to lose composure. Sunny enjoyed the feeling silently, a small smile finding its way onto his face.

Of course, it was only a familiar situation from his point of view. For Nephis, suddenly holding hands with a stranger must have been surprising. Her expression did not really change, but he could feel a subtle tension in her shoulders. It seemed that she was a bit uncomfortable with his bold action… maybe even dismayed by it?

'Ah… did I mess up?'

It was then that Effie's rattled expression slowly turned into a mischievous grin, and Sunny's eyes widened slightly. He had realized his mistake.

But by then, it was already too late.

'Oh, gods…'

Soon, he found himself sitting on a sofa side by side with Nephis, listening to Effie explain contraception to them… in gruesome detail…

'What the hell? Weren't you the one who got pregnant in the middle of a disastrous military campaign?! Why are you, of all people, telling me this stuff?!'

On the other hand… perhaps Effie was the best person to teach people about safety, considering that she knew the consequences of carelessness better than most. Not that Sunny needed any teaching!

Although… truth be told, his knowledge on the topic was mostly limited to the precautions meant for mundane people, Awakened at most. At higher Ranks of power, things progressively became much more complicated.

Nephis remained silent and nonchalant, but he found himself listening with interest. There was business to be made there, as well!

That... that was definitely the reason why he was paying attention...

'Wait… why I am acting this way?'

He frowned slightly.

Truth be told, while his actions earlier were very much in line with his personality, Sunny felt strangely… extra, at the moment. After thinking for a while, he took a deep breath.

'Ah.'

He was being affected by Effie's presence. No… actually, his mood had been a bit strange ever since he met Nephis in the Nameless Temple. Was there such an element to her presence, as well? If so, there were two different sources influencing him, mixing and fusing in a chaotic manner.

The influence was in no way strong, and he could easily suppress it if he wanted to. But it did seem to release his natural inhibitions, a little.

'What a mess.'

Spending time in the company of powerful Saints was a strange affair.

Getting himself under control, Sunny decided that he had enough of Effie's teasing.

He smiled politely at her, waited for her to pause, and then asked leisurely:

"Oh, by the way, Saint Athena. I couldn't help but overhear… did you mention wanting to gobble up something tasty earlier? Was it something we serve in the Brilliant Emporium?"

Effie, who was taking a sip of wine, suddenly spat it out.

Sunny elegantly raised an arm, shielding Neph's white trousers from the rain of wine droplets with the folds of the Nebulous Mantle.

"I'm sorry. Did I say something wrong?"

Effie coughed a few times and shook her head.

"No, no… it's alright. And thank you, but no! I have a husband!"

'Now you remember!'

He smiled.

"How is Ling's dad doing, by the way?"

Sunny did not have a lot of friends in Bastion, and apart from Aiko, that nameless guy was the closest thing he had to a buddy. They often shared stories about managing the Beast Farm and the Brilliant Emporium, exchanging ideas and the like. However, Ling's dad seemed to be busy lately, so they had not had time to catch up in a while.

Nephis was looking at them with a hint of curiosity… and a hint of relief? She had seemed utterly unaffected by Effie's graphic tirade before, but maybe Sunny was simply underestimating her poker face.

She raised an eyebrow and asked:

"You know each other?"

Sunny nodded.

"Yes."

Effie wiped her chin and smiled.

"Ah, yes. We've had a surplus of produce at the farm for some time now, and the Brilliant Emporium is our main buyer. I haven't had the pleasure of dining there often, though. Still, Master Sunless is an incredible chef! Oh, and he also helped us a lot by enchanting a few items for the farm."

She hesitated for a moment, and then gave Nephis a bright smile and a thumbs up.

"Princess, I approve! Handsome, cooks well… and is great with his hands…"

The last part was said with emphasis, and accompanied by a wink.

Nephis tilted her head in confusion.

"Well, yes. That is why I approached him."

Effie choked on her wine again.

Sunny, meanwhile, closed his eyes for a moment.

He knew that Nephis failed to understand the double meaning in Effie's words, and was referring to his skill as an enchanter. However… did she forget that they had not shared the details about the sword commission with the huntress, yet?!

He let go of her hand, afraid that his palms would become sweaty.

"A Memory commission. That is what she meant."

Nephis looked at him strangely.

"...Of course. What else would I have meant?"

Effie waved a hand in the air.

"Sure, sure. I believe you."

Followed by another wink.

'Damnation!'

Effie laughed, then put down her wine and looked at them, her eyes glistening with curiosity.

"Was that how the two of you first met?"

Nephis nodded.

"Yes."

But Sunny, compelled by his Flaw, answered at the same time:

"No."

Both Nephis and Effie looked at him with surprise.

Sunny forced out a smile.

'Crap.'

Chapter-1699: First Impressions

Nephis and Effie were staring at him in surprise. Maintaining a smile, Sunny cursed inwardly.

Over the years, he had gotten used to his Flaw, and it rarely landed him in real trouble these days. That was why he had relaxed a little, allowing himself more leeway while holding conversations.

There was also the fact that the true reason why the Flaw was so dangerous, his True Name, was gone now.

But there were still things he should not say!

'Crap.'

Sunny remained silent for a moment, then said calmly:

"Lady Nephis might not remember, but we actually met before."

It would have been extremely inconvenient if she asked when or where, so before either Nephis or Effie could, he added of his own accord:

"We briefly met in Antarctica, near the end of the campaign."

Both statements were true, and since he had volunteered them without being prompted, there was no question that would have demanded a more precise explanation. Of course, the statements were also not connected to each other, and although each of them was factual, together, they created a false impression.

That Sunny had met Nephis for the first time in Antarctica.

She raised an eyebrow.

"Really? I think I would have remembered someone so…"

She paused without finishing the sentence, remained silent for a moment, then added evenly:

"Remembered someone, so to speak."

'Huh?'

Her wording was a bit odd.

Sunny pretended to be embarrassed.

"Oh… it was on the day the Sword King defended the SQSC. It might not have been very memorable for Lady Nephis, considering everything else that was going on. Well, I was also covered in dirt from head to toe, so anyone would have had trouble recognizing me…"

She stared at him for a few moments, and then asked suddenly:

"Was meeting me very memorable for you?"

Sunny froze momentarily.

'What kind of question is that?'

That meeting of theirs… yes, it was quite memorable. In fact, it was seared into his memory like a brand, still festering even after all these years. That was the moment he had learned about his existence being erased from the hearts of everyone who knew him, after all.

Their actual first meeting was fresh in his memory, as well. Back then, on the bridge in front of the Academy... he had been attracted by how aloof and detached from the world young Nephis looked, standing there calmly with her headphones on. He had also felt a subtle sense of kinship with her, because she had been the only other Sleeper wearing the standard-issue police tracksuit, just like him.

Sunny smiled.

"For me… it was unforgettable."

Nephis kept her gaze on him for a brief moment, then looked away.

Then, a corner of her mouth curled upward slightly.

A second later, though, they were interrupted by Effie's excited squeal:

"I… I can't! The two of you are too cute!"

She laughed, then poured herself more wine and viciously attacked the plate of refreshments. As she was chewing, her gaze landed on the floorboards of the deck.

Effie lingered for a bit, then asked curiously:

"By the way, Master Sunless… it seems that you don't have a shadow today?"

He followed her gaze, noticing that Neph's shadow was all alone, painted in black across the floorboards. Gloomy was currently serving as an avatar, after all, channeling Sunny's consciousness to help Aiko.

Sunny shrugged nonchalantly.

"Oh. I seem to have misplaced it."

It was not a big problem to be seen without a shadow while he was strolling with Nephis or here on the ferry, but once they reached the castle… he would prefer to keep the strange nature of his shadow a better-guarded secret.

'What to do?'

Sunny hesitated for a moment, then used Shadow Control to call over one of the wild shadows populating the ferry. After it glided across the deck and glued itself to his feet, in reverent awe at the prospect of pretending to be the Lord's own shadow, he shaped it to resemble the contours of his body and nodded.

"Is this better?"

Effie blinked a couple of times.

"Nice trick! Right… so you were in Antarctica, as well? I don't think I

ever had a chance to ask. Were you one of us army grunts?"

Sunny sighed.

"I guess. It was nothing spectacular, though… certainly not anything worth bragging about. I had a cushy assignment at Army Command before ending up in a Nightmare. By the time I returned, there was nothing left to do but get on a boat and escape."

Sunny did not mention that he had been a member of the First Irregular Company and the Special Reconnaissance Unit before landing a position as a special government envoy to Clan Valor, technically assigned to Army Command. He wanted everyone to believe that he had been a mere paper-pusher in the vast military machine.

That suited his harmless persona much better than being known as a decorated officer who had fought on most of the deadliest battlefields of the Southern Campaign.

Effie shook her head gently.

"Frontline, Army Command… it's all the same. Everyone did their part. Anyone who survived that hell deserves my respect."

Then, she grinned.

"We are comrades! So, how about a military discount next time I come to eat at the Brilliant Emporium? One soldier to another… wait, actually, how about a family discount? Princess and I, we are practically sisters! Right, Neph?"

She looked at Nephis expectantly.

Nephis remained silent for a moment, and then said in an exceedingly even tone:

"I don't know her."

Effie stared at her with a betrayed expression.

Then, she whispered loudly:

"Come on, Neph. Help a sister out! Marry this guy fast so that I could save some money…"

Neph's eye twitched a little.

***

The ferry floated across the lake, slowly approaching the castle. The conversation flowed naturally, with Effie easing up on teasing them… a little… after getting her fill.

Sunny was not supposed to know much about the inner workings of Bastion, so he mostly kept silent, letting the two women catch up after not seeing each other for a while.

Effie was leaning back, looking at the water with a wistful expression.

"...Anyway, I don't have much time to waste. As soon as we reach the castle, I'll be rounding up people and bringing them back to NQSC. There's trouble in the Western Quadrant… again. I'm afraid that I'll be gone for a while, this time."

Nephis frowned, a hint of concern written on her face.

"How bad is it?"

Effie chuckled.

"Bad enough that they're sending Jet, as well. That should tell you everything you need to know. Oh… I'm sorry, Master Sunless. Beast Farm is going to be gone from Bastion for a few weeks, maybe even a couple of months. You'll need to find a new supplier."

He shook his head.

"That is okay. Don't worry about it."

He had other means of getting ingredients, albeit not as fresh and delicious as what Effie's husband grew. The Brilliant Emporium would have to cut down on food services, too, with him being busy following Neph around and crafting a Memory.

Effie smiled, then looked at Nephis.

"What about you? Where are you off to next? I don't believe that those Valor bast…"

She glanced at Sunny, then corrected herself:

"...that those wise Valor elders will let you rest for long. "

Nephis lingered for a moment, then answered in a calm tone:

"Back to Godgrave, I suppose."

The huntress suddenly seemed excited.

"Oh, right! You must have met him! That mysterious Saint, the Lord of Shadows… what is he like?"

Sunny was suddenly all ears.

Chapter-1700: His Own Worst Enemy

'Gossiping about me, huh? How exciting!'

Pretending to be oblivious, Sunny looked at Nephis and Effie with a little bit of masterfully performed confusion.

Nephis spared him a short glance, then shrugged.

"The Lord of Shadows… he is just as the rumors say. Immensely strong, more than a little bit sinister, and highly eccentric."

Effie chuckled.

"Well, anyone who chooses to live in a Death Zone has to be a lunatic. Still, to be called immensely strong by you, Princess… I am at a loss for words. Is there really such a monster in the world?"

Sunny blinked.

'Hey!'

What did she mean, highly eccentric? He was the picture of perfect mental health!

Well… maybe not…

Still, Sunny was a little hurt.

Nephis, meanwhile, smiled faintly.

"At the same time, he is nothing like what the rumors say. He is surprisingly considerate despite his tyrannical strength, kind despite wanting to appear sinister, and very shrewd despite his eccentricity."

Effie blinked, then briefly glanced at Sunny with a strange expression.

"Princess… well… why are you smiling that way? In front of your… actually, never mind!"

Nephis raised an eyebrow.

"Oh? Was I smiling? I didn't mean to."

Sunny took a sip of wine.

'No, no! Smile more!'

Why was Effie raining on his parade? What an insufferable woman!

The insufferable woman in question, meanwhile, grinned.

"That's fine and all. But what does he look like? Is he handsome? I bet that even if he is, he can't be as handsome as Master Sunless."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

Nephis shrugged again, seemingly uninterested in that topic.

"I don't know. The Lord of Shadows never shows his face. He is always either wearing a mask or a closed helmet… in fact, you can't even tell if there is a human body inside that armor, most of the time."

Effie seemed excited, for some reason.

"Really? Damn… what a pity. I guess he's horribly disfigured. Or just naturally ugly. Not that there's anything wrong with that… wait, what if he is bald? Or missing teeth?

Did you say he never takes his armor off? He must really reek, then! Gods, what a slob. Master Sunless here is definitely way better. He smells very nice. Simply delicious...

am I right, Master Sunless?"

Sunny stared at her wordlessly.

'Why is she dragging me into this? No, wait… what the hell does she mean, bald?! I'm not bald!'

But having feigned ignorance, he couldn't really defend his honor… the third avatar's honor.

No matter how much he wanted to.

Hiding his frustration, Sunny said weakly:

"I guess? I never really paid attention to how I smell…"

To his surprise, though, Nephis suddenly came to the Shadow Saint's defense:

"No, you're wrong. The Lord of Shadows, he… he is not disfigured or ugly. He is… well… he seems like a very outstanding young man, in all regards."

Sunny nodded subconsciously.

'You tell her, Neph!'

But then, he frowned.

'No… but why are you defending that bastard so much? I'm right here!'

Sunny was confused.

The Lord of Shadows was him. But Nephis didn't know that. So, was she praising some random guy in front of her supposed romantic partner? That was unacceptable!

But then, their relationship was fake. They had only really met each other a few days ago. So, technically, she knew the Lord of Shadows longer — and better. The two of them had even fought side by side against a harrowing Cursed abomination.

It was so confusing!

'What is this situation?'

How was he supposed to react?

While Sunny was questioning his life's choices, Effie scoffed.

"If he's such an outstanding man, why is he hiding his face behind a mask? What is he, an eighth-grader?"

Nephis frowned.

"Maybe it has something to do with his Flaw. Maybe he needs to hide his identity for an important reason. In any case, all I know is… that a man whose swordsmanship is so beautiful can't be unsightly."

Effie glared at her silently, as if wanting to say:

'Princess! Take a hint!'

What was the hint Nephis was supposed to take, Sunny did not know.

The huntress took a deep breath.

"Well, anyway, that guy seems to be hiding a lot. Unlike Master Sunless, who is like an open book. An honest and sincere man like Master Sunless doesn't need to hide behind a mask… not to mention that hiding that face behind a mask would be a crime…"

She seemed to get distracted for a moment, and then laughed.

"In any case, it seems that we are going to be arriving soon. Shall we change the topic?"

Nephis shrugged, seemingly confused by the whole conversation.

"You're the one who asked."

Effie smiled, then looked at Sunny apologetically.

"Oh, by the way… have you heard the news about the House of Night?"

It seemed that she really didn't want to talk about the Lord of Shadows anymore.

Sunny, who had been excited before, was now unsure how he felt about it. It was nice to hear Nephis praise him… but also made him angry, for some reason? What was going on with him today?

He spaced out for a few moments, listening to Nephis and Effie with one ear.

"...Have they conquered another Citadel?"

Effie nodded.

"Yes. It's the seventh one in two years — quite remarkable, actually. Their leadership has been making one miracle happen after another recently. I guess the descent of the Dream Gates really lit a fire under them. The House of Night has never been that active, that daring, or that successful before."

Nephis sighed.

"It still won't help them maintain their position. They are at too great a disadvantage without a Supreme. Not only in terms of raw power, but also in terms of relevance and population, both mundane and Awakened. I'm afraid that the House of Night is doomed to lose its status."

That was true… but although the third Great Clan was now miles behind the other two, without any hope of catching up, it was still vitally important. Both because of the role its ships played in the waking world, and because of how they could break the balance of power in the upcoming war.

An alliance with the House of Night could very well be the linchpin of the entire clash between the two Domains. Not even due to their Saints, but because the Twilight Sea bordered both the Sword Domain and the Song Domain in the south.

Song and Valor were only clamoring to conquer Godgrave because the House of Night was stubbornly maintaining neutrality. If either of the Great Clans managed to lure the Nightwalkers to their side, they would be able to launch swift attacks into the enemy territory while bypassing the barrier of the Death Zones separating their territories.

Effie grimaced.

"At least they are trying… and by the look of it, the House of Night is dead set on staying away from both Valor and Song. Well, I can understand why. Even if they join the winning side, there will be no future for them but to be absorbed and assimilated after the whole mess is over."

Sunny sighed quietly.

He wondered how Naeve was doing somewhere out there, in the Twilight Sea… the friendly Nightwalker must be having it hard, considering how swiftly the fortunes of his clan had changed.

Nephis, meanwhile, gave Effie a guarded look and then silently gestured to Sunny.

'You guys finally remembered that I'm not supposed to know anything about the war? Good for you!'

Effie blinked a couple of times, then shook her head.

"By the way, Master Sunless. Did you know that all the Legacy Clans are about to go to war?"

Neph's eyes widened.

"Effie!"

Before he could answer, the huntress smiled with a mischievous gleam in her eyes.

"...A war for this beautiful, but dense princess right here! Now that she has shown interest in you, every Legacy Clan will probably scramble to get her hitched to one of their scions before it's too late. The elders of Clan Valor might put pressure on her, too. So, that talk about safety I gave you?"

Effie grinned.

"Forget everything I said! As a former soldier, you must know the value of a preemptive strike, so… aim well and get her pregnant as

soon as possible! That will show them…"

The wine glass cracked in Neph's hand.

Sunny did not move, but somewhere far away, the Lord of Shadows gracelessly fell off his throne.

…The ferry docked at the Castle, the silence broken only by the bright sound of Effie laughing uncontrollably.

Chapter-1701: Illusory Castle

After they disembarked at the Castle, Effie bid them farewell and went away, giggling as she walked. Sunny and Nephis stared at her back until she disappeared from view, both not in a hurry to say anything.

'What do I even say after that?'

Sunny sighed and decided not to say anything. Nephis seemed to be of the same mind.

…His thoughts, however, were on fire in the wake of Effie's antics. So, while Sunny kept quiet, his imagination was running wild against his better judgment. He did not know what Nephis was thinking about, but he was definitely thinking about all kinds of things that he probably should not have been thinking about.

He threw a furtive glance at Neph. Was she really calm?

Was he imagining things, or did her cheeks seem a little pink?

'No, that is definitely my mind playing tricks on me.'

There was no way Nephis would be phased by mere words. It was just his wishful thinking… it was all Effie's fault!

That Effie! She really had not changed at all!

He would have thought that being a married woman with a child would curb her wilder tendencies, but alas. Having a loving family only seemed to embolden the vivacious huntress even more, as if having a safe space to retreat to gave her wicked tongue more power.

'It's a miracle that Little Ling is such a sweet boy, despite being raised by that miscreant…'

Sunny inhaled slowly.

Nephis lingered for a few moments, then looked at him with a deadpan expression. After a while, she said in her usual impassive tone:

"Don't mind Effie… Saint Athena. She's always like this."

Sunny chased the improper thoughts out of his mind... or at least tried to... and chuckled.

"That's alright. I'm rather accustomed to it… I used to have a close friend who was just like her. In fact, as much as I hate to admit it, I miss it a little."

She smiled faintly.

"I can't quite imagine."

The two of them started walking and left the pier. Instead of passing through the crowded gate of the castle, Nephis led him to a hidden postern, where two Knights bowed deeply before letting them in. The pass through the thick outer wall of Bastion was like a long tunnel with walls built of white stone.

Walking through it, Sunny wondered what could have brought this mighty wall down and left it laying in ruins, like it lay in the hidden realm that was imprisoned in the reflection of the illusory castle.

But then again, that terrible foe had even shattered the moon, so why would Bastion fare any better?

The Castle… was a city in and of itself. It was gargantuan, with somewhere around a million people living between its walls — almost half of them Awakened. There were hundreds of Masters here, as well, and at least a dozen Saints were always present, either guarding the stronghold or visiting from their own Citadels on business.

Sunny felt quite peaceful and comfortable living in the sprawling city on the other side of the lake, but here in the Castle, he couldn't help but feel a little tense.

Soon, they left the tunnel and entered a lively street.

"It's quite amazing, isn't it?"

His voice sounded a little stifled.

Nephis nodded.

"Indeed. Bastion is not called a Great Citadel for no reason."

From their point of view at the lowest and outermost ring of the great stronghold, the place they found themselves on looked no different from a city street — granted, both the wide paved road and the buildings standing opposite the monolithic barrier of the outer wall were made of the same white stone as it.

There were residential buildings, merchant stalls, commercial establishments, and people hurrying on their daily errands. However, all of it — except for people and later additions to the original architecture — seemed a little too grand in scale, as if built for creatures that weren't quite giants, but also not quite humans.

However, really, this street was a natural part of the defensive fortifications. Bastion was a marvel of military engineering, designed to withstand the most terrible siege. There were all kinds of courtyards, keeps, towers, and auxiliary buildings here, placed in a seemingly chaotic manner… but all of them followed a thoroughly purposeful design.

If viewed from above, Bastion resembled an artificial mountain separated into distinct levels, with concentric circles of inner walls protecting each of them and the main thoroughfare piercing each of the walls as it scaled the mountains in a spiral.

If one wanted to reach the main keep from either of the outer gates, they would have to circle the mountain many times, passing many lesser gates in the process.

Even things like the direction of the thoroughfare were full of purpose. If someone managed to breach the outer wall, they would have to follow it clockwise, which meant that their sword hand would be to the next wall, while their shield hand would be away

from it, letting the defenders rain arrows on the attackers more effectively.

All in all… Sunny did not envy the warriors of Clan Song, who might have to siege this castle one day. Even he felt that the task was much too daunting.

Bastion seemed truly impregnable.

But, of course, it wasn't. The ruins hidden in the moonlit reflection were proof.

Nephis led him deeper into the ancient castle, making sure that they would be seen by everyone who had time to look. The reactions people were giving them were much more intense than those at the lakeshore settlement — mostly because much more of them recognized who Nephis was.

Sunny could practically feel the veneration and admiration they felt for her. Wherever Changing Star went, people's faces suddenly looked bright and inspired, as if just seeing her gave them strength. Well… it made sense. Nephis had become somewhat of a symbol after the Forgotten Shore, and her fame only grew further in the last four years.

Especially for the people of the Sword Domain, she was a champion of peace and prosperity. A radiant figure who defended them from the horrors of the Nightmare Spell, and whose light illuminated all of humanity.

Princess Nephis… one of the two invincible Sword Sisters of Anvil's Domain.

The nickname Effie had given her in the Dark City was not that outlandish anymore, if at all.

So, Sunny could understand the gazes of adoration directed at Neph.

However…

The more intensely people admired her, the more confusion and simmering hostility his presence by her side caused them.

Who was that dainty stranger walking by Changing Star's side?

Who does he think he is, being so close to our princess?

Suddenly, he felt a little uncomfortable.

'I… might have underestimated the consequences of playing Neph's secret darling.'

He might have underestimated it severely!

As a passerby glared at him with obvious hostility, Sunny made sure that Nephis could not see, and glared back with a cold menace.

You can glower all you want, but are you worthy?

All of you wretches combined are not fit to stand by her side, only I am!

Well, that was what his glare was meant to convey, at least.

Chapter-1702: Legendary Encounter

Sunny was not unfamiliar with the Castle, since he had to come here every time he wanted to return to the waking world without raising any suspicions. However, he would usually spend quite a lot of time following the main thoroughfare to the main keep, where the Gateway was located.

This time, Nephis led him on a shorter path to the pinnacle of the stronghold, across narrow stairs and hidden posterns that he had not even known existed. There was no need to waste time at each checkpoint, either, so their progress was rather fast.

Who would dare to stop the Transcendent daughter of a Sovereign?

After a while, Sunny asked with a hint of curiosity:

"By the way, Lady Nephis… where, exactly, are we going?"

He knew that they were about to sign a contract, but wasn't sure where the signing would take place. Was he going to make a deal with Clan Valor, or with the Fire Keepers directly? Who else would be involved?

She looked at him with a hint of confusion, then suddenly seemed a little embarrassed.

"Oh… please forgive me. I have forgotten to explain properly."

With that, Nephis raised her hand and pointed to one of the tallest towers in Bastion. The tower was not much different to all the others, with one big exception.

There was a graceful flying ship floating in the air near it, moored to

the higher floor of the tower with thick cables. A beautiful tree was growing around its main mast.

'The Chain Breaker…'

Sunny unconsciously looked up, at the beautiful visage of the Ivory Island drifting in the air high above the lake.

"I see."

Nephis lingered for a moment.

"Very few people have ever visited my Citadel, but you don't have to worry. Everyone there is a trusted friend and ally. It is… it is also quite peaceful there. We won't be disturbed."

'Right.'

Sunny was not supposed to have ever been in the Ivory Tower, so he had to act as if the whole experience was new to him.

He put a sufficiently believable expression of wonder on his face, making sure to keep a proper level of decorum, of course.

"I've long heard about the beauty of the Ivory Tower. It is my luck to be able to visit it."

A faint smile appeared on Neph's face.

"I'm sure you'll like it."

They continued on their way, soon reaching a lesser courtyard in front of the tower. There were quite a few people here, although most of them were different from the crowd at the lower levels of the castle.

The closer to the pinnacle of the stronghold one was, the fewer mundane people there were around. At this point, Sunny could not see anyone but Awakened, with plenty of Masters mixed among them.

However, the gazes directed at him were not in any way friendlier.

Well, it was natural. He was an outsider, after all, and people were wary of outsiders.

Just before they entered the tower, a tall man wearing the colors of Clan Valor — a Knight, from the looks of it — approached them and bowed deeply.

"Saint Nephis, if I can have a minute of your time…"

She frowned slightly.

"What is it?"

The Knight hesitated for a moment, then said in a dignified tone:

"There is a slight problem with the supplies you requested. They were delivered on time, but the specifications… I'm afraid you will need to inspect them personally. If everything is in order, I'll give a command to immediately load them on the Chain Breaker."

The matter concerned the inner working of Clan Valor, so he was being vague around Sunny.

Nephis remained silent for a bit, then glanced his way.

Eventually, she said:

"Please wait for me a little, Master Sunless. I have to deal with this issue… my apologies. I'll be back in ten minutes."

He smiled.

"It's no problem."

He had no doubt that someone would inevitably try to bother him as soon as she left, but it was really of no concern to him. Unless Anvil himself decided to come and stir trouble, Sunny was confident in his ability to send any potential troublemaker on their way without any commotion.

Nephis hesitated for a few moments, then nodded curtly and walked away with the tall Knight.

Sunny was left alone, thinking that it was a good opportunity to compose himself.

Smiling faintly, he walked over to the lakefront ramparts of the lesser courtyard and gazed into the distance. He could see the young city stretching along the shore in the distance, bathed in sunlight and brimming with vitality.

The lake was calm and radiant. It was a beautiful sight.

As Sunny enjoyed the view and the warm breeze, he sighed.

He could sense two shadows approaching him from behind.

'That was fast.'

Turning around, he saw two men younger than him by a few years walking toward him. One was walking with purposeful strides, while the other was trying to hold him back with a troubled expression.

Both were Masters and wore enchanted armor, but neither donned the colors of Clan Valor. So, they must have been noble scions from vassal Legacy Clans.

'Legacies...'

Soon, the two scions reached him.

The one who had been purposeful gave Sunny a glare and said, his voice full of arrogant indignation:

"I am Ascended Tristan of the Aegis Rose clan. This is Ascended Mercy of the Dagonet clan. Who might you be?"

Sunny blinked a couple of times, looking at them in amusement.

'Wait, it can't be… is this the legendary arrogant young master encounter? It is, isn't it? Gods, the legends are true!'

He reminded himself to remain calm.

'Keep your cool. Be polite. Don't start trouble.'

Sunny smiled politely.

"I am called Ascended Sunless. How may I help you, gentlemen?"

Master Tristan frowned.

"Ascended Sunless? Of which clan?"

Sunny remained silent for a moment. Why was everyone so insistent on waving their family name around?

"...Of no clan."

The young man scoffed, while his friend tried to pull him away;

"Tristan, drop it… come on, we are going to be late for practice…"

Master Mercy of the Dagonet clan seemed to have a little bit of brain, at least. But the scion of Aegis Rose clan did not want to listen. Scowling fiercely, he moved a step closer to Sunny and asked, his voice harsh and domineering:

"Master Sunless of no clan seems to have some business with Lady Changing Star. But that doesn't give you the right to… to... don't think I didn't notice you ogling her with lewd eyes, scoundrel!"

'...What eyes? Huh?'

The second Legacy gave Sunny an apologetic glance and tried to pull his friend away harder. He seemed exasperated, hinting that Master Tristan had a habit of saying rash things.

Sunny took a deep breath.

'Be polite. Don't start trouble. Be polite…'

He calmed himself down, then opened his mouth and said:

"Why does a moron like you have the confidence to open his mouth and spout nonsense? If you were born brainless, at least have the decency to keep quiet. Better yet, get lost altogether. Don't think I didn't notice you being dropped on your head as a child, you

cretin…"

Chapter-1703: Courting Death

Sunny's words hung in the air, contrasted starkly against his polite smile. The two young Masters seemed frozen, as if unable to digest what they had just heard.

Mercy of Clan Dagonet let out a stifled breath.

At the same time, Ascended Tristan's eyes widened.

His face, frozen in a state of stunned disbelief, was slowly contorted by a grimace of righteous wrath.

Trembling in outrage, he bellowed:

"You dare?!"

Sunny couldn't quite believe it. He held his breath, his heart beating wildly.

'Is… is he going to say it? He's going to say it! He totally is!'

His smile remained perfectly pleasant.

"I do dare. Why, wasn't that obvious from my remark? Or has your Flaw made you deaf? Goodness gracious… dumb and deaf. What an unfortunate fate. You have my sympathy."

The young Master stared at him, mouth agape. After a few moments of silence, Tristan pointed a trembling finger at Sunny and hissed:

"You are courting death, mongrel!"

'He said it!'

He had really said it. That was… Sunny had no words. It was really too astonishing.

He struggled to suppress a burst of laughter.

'Amazing. But also, what is it with Legacy brats and calling people mongrels?'

Sunny kept his composure with titanic effort, and shrugged.

"Funny you should say, but I am indeed somewhat of a mongrel."

His smile widened, which seemed to send the young Master into a spiral.

With his face turning a concerning shade of red, Ascended Tristan outstretched a hand and growled:

"You've gone too far, scoundrel… you need to be taught a lesson. I, Tristan of Aegis Rose, hereby challenge you to a duel!"

Sunny blinked.

'Huh?'

No, he was just speaking metaphorically when he suggested that the fool had been dropped on his head. But now, it seemed like maybe there was some truth to the statement?

By now, their spat had attracted a lot of attention. The people in the courtyard were all gazing at them with strange expressions. Master Mercy had abandoned his attempts to drag the second Legacy away and was now looking around helplessly.

'A duel, huh...'

Sunny erased the smile from his face and said in a solemn tone:

"I refuse."

Tristan grinned.

"Great! Then summon your… huh? What? You refuse?"

Sunny nodded.

"Yes. I refuse. What, are you really deaf?"

The young Master seemed flustered. He stared at him in confusion for a few moments, then asked in a trembling voice:

"How can you refuse? That's cowardly! D—don't you have any honor?"

Amused, Sunny simply shook his head.

"That's right, I am a coward, and I don't have any honor. In fact, I wouldn't be caught dead having honor. Such a distasteful thing."

After being accosted by an arrogant young master and asked if he was courting death, all Sunny had to do to experience the entire triumvirate of clichés was to slap Ascended Tristan across the face. However, he had no intention of doing that…

Who knew, perhaps the poor fool was really suffering from a character Flaw. His behavior was too outrageously hot-blooded to be explained by simple foolhardiness. Plus, it wouldn't be a good look for Sunny to go around beating children — not to mention that his meticulously cultivated harmless persona was not supposed to be able to win a duel with a Legacy Ascended.

No matter how much he wanted to teach the loud brat a memorable lesson.

Ascended Tristan huffed and puffed, staring at him with angry eyes. Then, a mocking smile suddenly twisted his lips.

"Don't be too afraid, coward, I won't kill you! We'll just duel to first blood. I… I refuse your refusal! Summon your weapon and face me!"

Sunny stared at him incredulously for a bit.

'Ah, to hell with it...'

He sighed.

"To first blood? Fine… I accept."

His smile turned a little sheepish.

"But, uh… I don't have a Memory weapon. So I can't summon any."

Hearing these words, young Master Tristan paled:

"You… you don't even have a single Memory weapon? And you call yourself an Ascended?"

Sunny scratched the back of his head, his face full of embarrassment.

"I do call myself an Ascended… but not all Ascended are like you, scions of storied Legacy Clans. Personally, I manage a small café and a shop… the last time I was in a battle, I had to run away and barely escaped with my life…"

It had been a battle against a Cursed Tyrant, but they didn't have to know that.

Master Mercy seemed relieved. He let out a long sigh and said tentatively:

"Then, let us just drop this matter. Tristan, he is clearly not a…"

But his friend shook his head furiously, summoning a Memory.

"No, I simply can't let this matter rest! I demand satisfaction!"

Soon, a heavy greatsword manifested itself from sparks of light. He scoffed contemptuously and shoved the sword into Sunny's hands.

"Here. This sword is called the Heart Breaker, and it is a family heirloom of my clan! I'll lend it to you for today. It is your privilege to be able to hold it, knave!"

With that, he shook his head and mumbled under his breath:

"This, really… I just don't understand why Lady Nephis would associate with such a profligate wastrel… he must have deceived her with his looks, the scoundrel…"

Sunny held the greatsword awkwardly and rested its tip on the

ground. No, really, what was this situation? Why was the person who had challenged him to a duel supplying him with a powerful weapon to fight that duel? Was Master Tristan actually brainless?

At the same time, the young man in question summoned another Memory, this one a much lighter arming sword. From the looks of it, he was giving his opponent an advantage — a better weapon with a longer reach.

He also dismissed the outer layers of his armor, leaving only a gambeson jacket behind.

"Here! I won't use any enchantments, so you won't be at a disadvantage! Are you ready?"

Sunny remained silent for a moment, then shrugged timidly.

"I guess I am?"

Young Master Tristan grinned.

"Then, here I come! Prepare to be humbled, wimp!"

He brandished his sword and lunged forward.

Under the dubious gazes of everyone gathered in the courtyard, the duel started.

Chapter-1704: A Slap Heard Around the World

It seemed like the diminutive Master Sunless, an unknown Ascended from the lakeshore settlement, had no chance against the young master of the Aegis Rose clan. Not only was Tristan much taller and more powerfully built, but he was also a Legacy…

And Legacies still held the title of the most skilled and deadly warriors of humanity, by far, even now that the number of Awakened had swelled. Their upbringing, training, and martial culture were all designed to produce lethal fighters to rule the battlefield unopposed.

The idle onlookers did not know what the pretty young man had done to enrage the Legacy scion so much, but from the looks of it, he was in for a good beating... which was a shame, considering that with his jade skin and slender figure, he looked quite handsome.

Sadly, though, he didn't look like much of a fighter.

Neither did Master Sunless seem very familiar with handling a blade. He tried to swing the provided greatsword to deflect an incoming attack, but failed.

Not, not just that…

Perhaps due to his short stature and slender build, he actually lost control of the heavy blade and allowed its weight to pull him off balance. Instead of deflecting the opponent's sword, he yelped and stumbled forward instead.

That was a common mistake most often seen among Awakened. Young Awakened were prone to overestimating their newfound strength, forgetting that their mass and center of gravity remained the same. So, it was easy for them to misjudge things and end up

being pulled forward by the inertia of their own swing.

Still. For a Master to be that inexperienced in combat was a bit…

The delicate Ascended seemed to be doomed.

But, strangely enough, he ended up being saved by his clumsy mistake. It was doubtful that he could have deflected Tristan's powerful strike, but after stumbling forward and nearly sprawling on the ground, the opponent's sword missed and flew harmlessly above his head.

There was a murmur among the onlookers…

"Lucky."

But then, they were treated to a bizarre spectacle.

That Master Sunless was not just lucky… it was as if he was charmed!

No matter what Tristan of Aegis Rose tried to do, his sword never seemed able to reach the cowardly opponent. Master Sunless slipped on the cobblestones, accidentally evading a skillful attack. While trying to stand up, he tripped on the hem of his own silk robe, losing balance and gracelessly sprawling on the ground… but also making Tristan's follow-up strike miss him entirely.

While trying to block a downward slash, he actually failed to hold on to his sword and dropped it, staggering back in panic. However, in the process, the coward accidentally kicked the falling sword and sent it flying in the direction of the Legacy scion, who was forced to hastily defend his lower torso and retreat.

Then, Master Sunless recklessly bent down to pick up the fallen sword — a grievous mistake when facing an armed opponent! However, it was exactly because no one in their right mind would think of leaving themselves so open to a lethal blow that Tristan had never anticipated it, once again fruitlessly sliced the empty air above the oblivious opponent's head.

"What are you doing?! Fight like a man!"

A sheepish smile appeared on the unknown Master's deathly pale face.

"But I… I was trying to pick up my sword! How am I supposed to fight without a sword?"

Ascended Tristan let out an infuriated growl.

"Just take it, damn! I'll step back!"

Under everyone's bewildered gazes, he took a step back and waited patiently for his opponent to arm himself.

But Master Sunless did not seem to be in a hurry, breathing heavily.

Tristan's face twitched.

"What are you doing?!"

The delicate young man coughed.

"Well… you didn't specify that I should pick it up immediately, did you? So I thought I'd catch my breath real quick."

The Legacy scion seemed stuck between complete disbelief and apoplectic fury.

"Pick it up right this second!"

Master Sunless bent down and gripped the sword.

"Alright, alright… there's no need to shout…"

Soon, the oddly comical duel continued.

He continued stumbling blindly through the hurricane of steel, remaining unscathed by sheer, ridiculous luck.

But even that helpless fool's luck was bound to run out sooner or later. And finally, in less than a minute, Tristan's sword pierced the silk robe and bit into the delicate young man's shoulder.

He had held back, not wishing to deliver a serious wound to the

offending profligate, so the cut was shallow.

Still, a cut was a cut.

…It also hurt like a real cut. Sunny grimaced.

Young Master Tristan, meanwhile, gave him a disdainful smirk and retrieved his sword. The two of them were standing close to each other, and the Legacy was staring down at Sunny, his face full of pleased indignation.

"Serves you right, scoundrel. The victory is mine. Now… apologize! Recount your misdeeds and humbly beg forgiveness! I'll let you off easy if you do... but if you don't, don't blame me for being ruthless!"

But Sunny simply tilted his head.

"...Who says that the victory is yours?"

Tristan blinked.

"What? I clearly just won. What are you…"

But Sunny was nonplussed. He raised the collar of the Nebulous Mantle, revealing the black shirt beneath.

"We agreed to fight to first blood. Do you see any blood?"

The young Master stared at his chest in confusion. There was clearly a cut in the little knave's shirt… but where was the blood?

Even the blade of his sword was clean.

He frowned and started to speak, his tone full of confusion:

"How…"

But before he could finish…

And to the absolute shock of everyone watching…

The next moment, Sunny's fist slammed into his face with an audible bang, sending young Tristan of Aegis Rose staggering back.

The Legacy scion collided with his friend, Master Mercy, while covering his face with a hand. His stunned eyes were opened wide.

There was blood dripping between his fingers beneath them.

Suddenly, the courtyard was silent.

In that silence, Ascended Tristan slowly lowered his hand, revealing two red streams flowing out of his nostrils and marring his handsome face.

His voice was listless:

"You… you…"

Sunny dropped the heavy greatsword on the ground with visible relief, rubbed his wrists, and let out a sigh.

Then, he smiled.

"Well, it seems like I have won. Good fight, good fight. Now, shall we proceed with begging for forgiveness? You don't need to kneel… I'm not a pervert, so I'm not into such stuff…"

At that moment, young Master Tristan looked like he would spit blood. That, too, would have constituted Sunny's victory... if the Legacy wasn't already bleeding...

Then, Tristan's features contorted, and he seemed to completely lose his mind.

With a face flush with murderous wrath, the Legacy lunged forward and roared:

"You wretched mongrel!"

Sunny pretended to be frightened and flinched away with an ungentlemanly shriek.

Coincidentally — or rather, quite purposefully — the sun was directly behind him.

Which meant that his shadow was sprawled on the cobblestones directly in front of him.

Right where Ascended Tristan's foot had just landed.

Using a tiny bit of essence, Sunny stealthily manifested a small part of the wild shadow and made it trip the poor fool without anyone noticing.

That was more than enough to send the enraged young Master, who had committed to the attack a little bit too hard, completely off balance.

It all worked splendidly.

…In fact, it worked a little bit too well.

'Oh. Crap.'

Sunny had forgotten to take one small, but vitally important detail into account.

In the next moment, everyone in the courtyard witnessed a startling scene.

Ascended Tristan of the Aegis Rose clan lunged at the dainty Master, who let out an embarrassing shriek and flinched away in fear. By doing so, he not only completely avoided the sudden attack, but also caused the Legacy to lose balance and be pulled forward by the weight of his sword.

And there, right behind his cowardly opponent…

Was the parapet of the courtyard ramparts.

The young Legacy had no time to slow down and collided with it at full speed, buckling at the waist and flying over the stone parapet in the blink of an eye.

A split second later, his figure disappeared from view.

A dumbfounded silence settled over the courtyard.

...In a few moments, everyone shuddered as they heard a loud crash from somewhere far below.

Master Sunless looked back with a strange expression on his face, then cleared his throat and gracefully straightened his mantle with an elegant motion.

Then, he turned to Mercy of Clan Dagonet and said, his voice full of sincere concern:

"Sir Mercy… why are you dawdling? Shouldn't you hurry up and tend to your friend? Such a fall won't kill him... I think... but he'll certainly need a good healer."

The petrified young man slowly nodded.

"Ah… y—yes… I'll go…"

With that, he turned around and hurried away.

But at that moment, Master Sunless called out to him:

"Wait a moment!"

Ascended Mercy froze and slowly turned around.

"...Yes?"

Sunny smiled and pointed to the heavy greatsword laying on the ground.

"The sword… what was it, the Hard Breaker? Take the sword with you!"

The young Master stared at the greatsword for a moment, then bent down to pick it up.

"Yes…"

He mumbled an apology and dashed away.

Sunny grinned.

"Make sure that Ascended Tristan takes his time to rest and recuperate! There's no need to rush!"

He sighed and then added, his voice full of magnanimity:

"He can beg me for forgiveness at a later date!"

Chapter-1705: Familiar

When Nephis returned, the courtyard seemed a little livelier than it had been before. A few people had strange expressions on their faces, and a few more seemed to be glancing at Master Sunless from time to time, their gazes full of contempt and amusement.

The charming enchanter himself was standing near the parapet of the ramparts, not paying the pointed gazes any attention. He was looking down calmly, a small smile playing on his lips.

Nephis frowned slightly.

'Has anyone bothered him?'

She had not anticipated that leaving Master Sunless alone for a few minutes would be a problem. It was only an hour or two after they had shown themselves together in public, after all… no matter what kind of rumors people wanted to spread, such things took time.

Nephis definitely did not want anything remotely unpleasant to happen to the delicate young man, so she had to be more watchful in the future.

Approaching Master Sunless, she said in her usual even tone:

"I am back. Did something happen?"

He turned and looked at her with a smile, then lowered his gaze awkwardly.

"Ah… well… nothing too serious. There were a couple young men who wanted to have words with me. I'm afraid I failed to resolve the issue amicably. Oh, well... some people simply don't have manners. I'm rather used to such situations."

Neph's frown deepened.

Sunny, of course, was talking about himself — it was Sunny who didn't bother with basic manners unless he wanted to, and was therefore used to facing the violent consequences of running his venomous mouth.

But Nephis understood it differently.

[Cassie?]

Who were these young men, and how dare they be rude to Master Sunless?

Cassie responded a moment later, her voice deceptively smooth:

[...Tristan of Aegis Rose challenged Master Sunless to a duel.]

Nephis almost jumped. Of course, her calm expression remained the same… but her mind was suddenly awash with scorching flames.

[And you didn't warn me?! I explicitly asked you to keep an eye on him in my absence!]

Imagining the headstrong and domineering scion of the Aegis Rose clan bullying the elegant and gentle Master Sunless made her blood boil… for some reason. Feeling a degree of anger would have been both expected and reasonable, but even Nephis herself was surprised by the intensity of her reaction.

The image was simply... simply too offensive. Perhaps it was because she had just promised herself to protect the charming young man? Now, mere hours later, it had already come to this.

Nephis was on the verge of blushing again — this time, out of shame.

A sudden thought surfaced in her mind.

'...Should I destroy the Aegis Rose clan?'

She blinked.

'No, wait, what am I thinking about?'

Luckily, at that moment, Cassie responded to her heated question:

[Neph, relax. What is with you today? Master Sunless is not entirely helpless, and Tristan of Aegis Rose is not entirely brainless. It's just that his Flaw is… well, you know how he is. In any case, he is not a malicious person, just a hot-blooded fool. The worst that could have happened was one of them receiving a scrape…]

Nephis frowned.

[Wait, could have happened? Not could happen? The duel already took place?!]

Cassie coughed.

[About that… maybe don't mention anything to Master Sunless. It might be embarrassing for him... even though he technically didn't lose...]

Nephis studied the charming young man silently. Almost immediately, she noticed a thin vertical tear in his robe, where none had been before.

'I… I should offer to heal him…'

She imagined laying hands on his chest and infusing it with her flames. But how could she offer to heal him without hurting his pride? Cassie said not to mention the duel…

Nephis lingered for a few moments, and then reluctantly decided not to say anything. If Master Sunless wanted to keep what had happened to him a secret, she had to respect his wishes.

He was already on the losing side of their relationship... which was to say, employer and employee relationship!... so she had to be mindful of his pride.

The Aegis Rose clan, however…

Nephis usually stayed away from the internal politics of the Sword

Domain, but if she wanted to exert influence, there was plenty of influence to go exert. Young Master Tristan was about to experience some hardship in his life… not enough to kill him, but plenty enough to teach him a few lessons on how to manage his Flaw better.

'That will also clearly show the other clans that I favor Master Sunless, and that touching the person I favor… pretending to favor, I mean… will not go unpunished.'

Which could further the deception and at the same time protect the charming enchanter going forward, thus killing two birds with one stone.

Nephis took a deep breath, still feeling guilty.

Then, she contained her emotions, nodded lightly, and said:

"Then, please, follow me. There won't be any other delays."

Master Sunless smiled and gallantly gestured forward.

"After you, my lady."

As they ascended the steps of the tall tower, Nephis remained silent and thought back to what Cassie had said.

'...What is it with me today, indeed?'

Many people thought that Nephis was a cold and emotionless person, but they were all wrong. Her emotions, in fact, often burned with a frightening intensity… it was just that she rarely showed them, if at all.

Still, looking back, she felt like she had been too flustered in the last few hours — and even before that. Being in the company of the charming enchanter had a strange kind of effect on her…

Granted, anyone would have been flustered after what Effie had done! Just thinking about it… no, no, no. Nephis refused to think about it!

But it was an undeniable fact that she couldn't help but act unlike her

usual self around Master Sunless. Usually, she would have been much more guarded around a stranger… but there was just something about the delicate young man that made her lower her guard.

It was like an odd sense of familiarity that had no reason to exist, but was deeply compelling… as if he reminded her of something, or someone, that she had been longing for without even knowing.

'How strange.'

The feeling was indeed strange… but not unwelcome. It tasted a little sweet, and a little bitter. But mostly, it was just there.

Nephis sighed.

'My behavior thus far has been nothing short of embarrassing. Considering that the two of us will be spending a lot of time together, I really need to maintain composure, and treat Master Sunless with the degree of respect he deserves.'

She glanced at him, her gaze once again lingering on his exquisite features and glistening onyx eyes for a moment too long.

Suddenly, Nephis felt that maintaining composure… would be a bit hard.

Chapter-1706: Memory Purveyor

Following Nephis, Sunny ascended the tall tower and found himself on a spacious balcony that served as a pier for the Chain Breaker. Neither of them had spoken about the duel, and it suited him just fine.

In any case, he had to admit that his actions had been a little naughty. He could have defused the situation by groveling a little, but chose to antagonize the pompous Legacy instead for no good reason. Explaining the sequence of events to Nephis would have been a bit embarrassing, and so…

Sunny went ahead and shamelessly pushed that responsibility onto Cassie.

Some would call such a move unbecoming, but he preferred to call it… delegation!

The Chain Breaker was floating in the air a few meters away, with a wide wooden plank affixed between its deck and the stone balcony. Several Fire Keepers seemed to have just finished loading a bunch of wooden crates into the cargo hold of the graceful vessel, and were now resting beneath the branches of the sacred tree.

Noticing Nephis, all of them stood up.

Then, their gazes fell on Sunny.

The Fire Keepers — especially the two women — had a bit of a strange reaction to his appearance.

'What's wrong with these people…'

Considering how devoted the Fire Keepers were to Nephis, he would have expected a more intense version of the jealous hostility the denizens of the Castle had met him with.

However, they seemed more stunned than unfriendly.

"M—master Sunless? Why are you here?"

He forced out a polite smile.

"Good day. Oh… I am here to sign a contract. I think we'll be working together often in the future, so please take care of me."

The Fire Keepers slowly turned to Nephis.

Then, the two women suddenly broke into wide smiles.

"Lady Nephis… thank you!"

"Nice!"

He stared at them in confusion.

'Why are they giving her thumbs up?'

The Fire Keepers frequented the Brilliant Emporium due to their friendship with Aiko. Perhaps they really liked his cooking and assumed that he would be employed as a chef?

Was the food situation on the Ivory Island that bad?

Nephis coughed.

"Ah… yes. I've invited Master Sunless to the Tower. Please get ready to ascend."

They joined the Fire Keepers on the deck. The wooden plank was swiftly removed, the mooring cables untied, and no more than a minute later, the flying ship slowly moved.

The leaves of the sacred tree rustled as the Chain Breaker started to climb into the sky. Sunny looked up and studied it for a while, his gaze lingering on the golden fruits.

'What would happen if I fed these fruits to Rain?'

Currently, Rain was preparing to hunt an Awakened Demon in order to absorb some of its essence and push her own toward Awakening. Such was the path most of the ancient people had followed, forging their fates in the crucible of combat. The fruits of the sacred tree contained essence, as well, so its existence was much more precious than the carriers of the Spell could ever imagine.

Granted, it was a rhetorical question. If Sunny simply wanted Rain to Awaken, he would have showered her with soul shards and been done with it. But what he wanted was to make her strong enough to survive on her own, if need be… and so, cutting corners would do her more harm than good.

It was the same reason why the Legacy Clans kept sending their children to face the winter solstice instead of safely bringing them to the Dream Realm in advance, by gaining access to a Sovereign's Gate. Sunny often clashed with Legacies, but he had to admit that they did a lot of things right.

'Ah. If only all the young Legacies were like Awakened Telle instead of Awakened Tristan…'

He hesitated for a moment, then looked at Nephis.

The two of them were alone at the bow of the Chain Breaker, gazing at the breathtaking view of the castle, the lake, and the city sprawling along its shore. The atmosphere was quite romantic, but sadly, there was no time to have a proper conversation.

The Ivory Island was drifting in the sky above the lake, just shy of casting its shadow on the ancient walls of Bastion. It would only take the flying ship a few minutes to reach it.

And, indeed, the Chain Breaker landed softly on the waters of the smaller lake glistening among the emerald grass of the island before Sunny could think of anything to say.

"Please, come this way."

Nephis led him toward the Ivory Tower, but she didn't seem to be in

a hurry. On the way, they toured most of the island, with her showing him around and explaining how the Citadel was organized.

It was just as beautiful and tranquil as Sunny had remembered. There had been a few changes in the past four years, with the island looking much better cared for and settled. However, the essence of the place remained the same.

The emerald grass, the clear lake, the grove of ancient trees, the sun-bleached bones of the mighty dragon… and the great pagoda of pristine white stone towering above it all like a heavenly palace.

Sunny had last visited the Ivory Island almost immediately after killing the Winter Beast. Back then, he had been skulking in the shadows and in a hurry to leave, unwilling for anyone to notice his presence.

It was much nicer to stroll across the verdant grass in the open, and in Neph's company on top of that.

A smile found its way onto his face — this one genuine, not forced.

Eventually, they found their way into the tower and ascended its steps, reaching Cassie's chambers on one of the higher floors. The blind seer occupied several rooms, one of them serving as her bedroom, one as her office, and one as a parlor to receive guests and hold meetings.

The two of them entered the office.

The chamber was bathed in sunlight, with tasteful wooden furniture placed sparsely on the stone floor. Cassie herself was sitting behind a desk, her hair a little disheveled. There was a serious expression on her face and solemn focus in her beautiful blue eyes.

However… there was a bit of a strange smell in the office.

Sunny frowned in confusion.

'Huh… why does it smell like popcorn?'

Not that it mattered.

Throwing the unnecessary thought out of his mind, Sunny bowed courteously and said in a polite tone:

"Saint Cassia."

Cassie nodded.

"Master Sunless. Please, have a seat."

Sunny and Nephis sat down in front of her desk, after which the blind seer handed him a stack of papers, with the clause of the contract written on them in neat and pretty cursive.

She must have asked one of the Fire Keepers to serve as her eyes while writing, because otherwise, that tidy handwriting would have been skewed and incomprehensible.

Cassie smiled.

"There is a lot to discuss… but, please. Read and sign the contract first."

Sunny gave her a long look.

'...It's your lucky day that I know cursive!'

Everyone who received a proper education did, but Sunny had only ever known how to type things before coming to the Academy. He had learned cursive later, after returning from the Forgotten Shore and getting himself a position as a research assistant.

But, of course, no one had any way of knowing that.

Sighing deeply, he looked over the contract and signed it. Nephis watched him intently as he did.

The moment his signature was put on paper, the corner of her mouth seemed to curl upward slightly.

Sunny smiled.

'Well, as long as she's happy.'

"It's a pleasure doing business with you."

And that… was how Sunny became the Memory Purveyor of the Fire Keepers.

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Unbeknownst to him, though, something else was happening while he was signing the contract.

The news of Sunny's duel with Tristan of Aegis Rose was spreading across Bastion with the speed of a forest fire. Of course, with each retelling, it collected embellishments and turned more and more outrageous.

People were talking about it all over the city.

"Have you heard? Some unknown Master defeated Lord Tristan. In one strike!"

"They say that they were fighting for Changing Star's affection…"

"There were several Valor Knights and dozens of Awakened in the courtyard, but no one even tried to stop the duel…"

"There were dozens of Valor Knights in the courtyard trying to stop him, but he defeated them all before striking Lord Tristan in the face!"

"There were a hundred Valor Knights in the courtyard trying to stop him, but he easily defeated them all. And then beheaded Lord Tristan with one strike!"

"That unknown Master is too scary! Too tyrannical!"

"What a monster!"

If Sunny had heard these whispers, he would have paled.

He would have also probably said something like…

"Oh, no. Oh, no! Not again!"

But he didn't hear anything until the next morning.

…When Aiko stormed into the kitchen of the Brilliant Emporium and tossed a newspaper on the table.

"Boss… what the hell is this?!"

Frowning, Sunny picked up the newspaper and read the title on the first page.

The title read:

"A Duel For a Saint's Heart! Wretched Mongrel, Master S, defeats the Noblest of Knights, Lord T!"

His hand trembled.

Chapter-1707: The Fine Nuances of Demon Hunting

The stars shone brightly in the cold black sky. Sitting on a wide tree branch, Rain studied them silently, surrounded by darkness.

'It's strange.'

Some of the stars looked familiar, but she couldn't recognize any constellations. The alien sky of the Dream Realm was different from that of Earth, but worse than that, it was both fickle and unreliable. The stars shining upon the Song Domain were different from those illuminating the Sword Domain, and even various regions of the two kingdoms did not share the same heaven.

Some places did not even have a sun, while others were bathed in the light of many moons.

Astronomers were probably going crazy…

"Why are you still awake? Sleep. You'll need all your strength tomorrow."

Her teacher's voice resounded softly from the darkness, making Rain sigh.

He was right. She had climbed the enormous tree and tied herself to the branch in order to rest, but now that there was nothing else left to do…

"I can't sleep."

Sleep was escaping her.

Her teacher chuckled.

"Nervous?"

Rain remained silent for a while. Was she nervous? She couldn't tell.

They had spent a lot of time preparing for this hunt. From searching for suitable prey and learning all that could be learned about it to coming up with plans and contingencies, studying the terrain, and preparing all the necessary equipment. The process was only different from all the previous hunts because it had been so extensive.

She was supposed to kill an Awakened Demon this time, after all.

So, Rain did feel a little nervous… frightened, even. But at the same time, she was a little excited. Not only because successfully slaying the demon would finally allow her to grasp the key of Awakening, which she had been trying to do for many years, but also because of the challenge itself.

She always felt a pleasant rush of adrenaline when facing appalling abominations in battle. To be strong, to be able to protect herself and other people — that was what she wanted, and why she had accepted the ominous shadow's offer to be her teacher.

Rain smiled.

"What is there to be nervous about? It's just an Awakened Demon."

Her teacher laughed in the darkness.

"Fair enough."

There was a bit of silence, and then Rain asked against her better judgment:

"Teacher, what was the first Awakened Demon you fought like?"

The darkness spoke in a tone of nostalgia:

"Oh, that guy? Ah… as tall as a house, covered in a carapace of impregnable steel armor, with claws strong enough to crush diamonds and a pair of razor-sharp scythes in place of hands. A really charming fellow."

Rain raised an eyebrow. Was such a creature really worth feeling nostalgic about?

"So, how did you kill it?"

Her teacher laughed.

"Let's see… that was before my Awakening, when I was not much stronger than you. So I summoned a Corrupted Devil and pitted them against each other. At least I think it was a Corrupted Devil — truth be told, I still have no idea what that thing was, even all these years later. It sure was unforgettably creepy, though."

He paused for a moment, and then added with a sigh:

"And then I acted as bait while my partner finished the wounded demon off."

Rain opened her eyes wide, stunned. She wasn't even sure what shocked her more — the fact that her teacher had apparently been able to summon Corrupted Devils before Awakening, or that he used to have a partner.

Who would partner up with that insufferable bastard? Were they crazy?

She hesitated for a moment, then asked curiously:

"Where's your partner now, teacher?"

The darkness remained silent for a while, this time.

Then, he said in a carefree tone:

"Well, I imagine she's in a beautiful heavenly palace, looking down upon us mortals."

His tone was carefree, but for the first time, Rain could feel a hint of a strange emotion in it.

What did he mean?

If her teacher was a dark deity, then could his partner be a celestial deity? No — gods were dead, as were all the lesser divinities. Only Nightmare Creatures remained.

So, then… was his partner dead? Was that what he meant?

Right, it made sense. Her teacher had once admitted to being thousands of years old, so anyone who had fought by his side before his Awakening would have been dead for a very, very long time.

Rain sighed, suddenly feeling pity for her poor teacher. Wishing to distract him from unpleasant memories, she asked:

"But how did you manage to summon a devil to fight that demon?"

He chuckled.

"By setting the demon on fire. Now, enough talking. Go to sleep."

'Setting the demon on fire? How does that even make sense?'

Full of confusion, Rain let out a long sigh and closed her eyes.

The tree branch was swaying slightly under her, which was… a bit calming.

Just before she slipped into the embrace of sleep, a sudden thought surfaced in her drowsy mind.

'Wait… if he killed that demon with a partner… then why the hell is he making me hunt this demon alone?!'

Her anxious dreams were cold and restless.

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In the morning, Rain untied the rope fastening her to the branch and carefully climbed down. Soon enough, she reached the ground, standing on the outskirts of a vast forest of dead trees.

Ravenheart was so far away that the mountain chain was merely a dark line on the horizon. There was no ash around, and although the

frozen ground was covered in frost, there was no snow either.

This was the place where the Awakened Demon she was intending to kill dwelled.

Humanity had conquered a vast area in the Dream Realm, but that did not mean that the two Domains were entirely safe. In fact, safety was a fleeting illusion here — apart from the Citadels and their immediate vicinity, the wilds were still ruled by the Nightmare Creatures.

Humans had only really started to encroach on their reign after the advent of the Dream Gates four years ago, building roads and expanding their settlements.

In that regard, the current era was very much like the dawn of the legendary Age of Heroes, when mortal champions battled against countless abominations to help the nascent human civilization survive and spread.

Of course, modern humans had no gods to guide them. They only had Queen Song, the King of Swords... and the Nightmare Spell.

…Well, in Rain's case, she also had an oddball of a shadow showing her the way.

While she was checking her weapons in the dim twilight of the early dawn, her teacher asked calmly:

"What makes demons so dangerous? Their strength? Their speed? Their resilience?"

Rain shook her head.

"No. It's their intelligence. Beasts and monsters might be stronger, faster, and much more resilient than me, but they are also not too bright. A demon, however, is as intelligent as me… it might even outsmart me, if I'm not careful."

Her teacher emerged from her shadow and nodded.

"So, how do you kill a demon?"

She counted her arrows while answering:

"By being more prepared. By controlling the battlefield, knowing the terrain, and learning about the enemy in advance. By taking initiative and not making any mistakes. By having a clear mind and deadly resolve."

He smiled.

"No one is perfect. Mistakes happen whether you want to or not… so what are you going to do if you do make a mistake?"

Rain stared at him for a moment, then returned the smile defiantly.

"Curse you bitterly while I die?"

Her teacher laughed.

"Go on and try dying. See what happens…"

She stared at him for a bit, then shook her head.

"Fine. Since teacher insists, I won't die."

He nodded with a smile.

"Good. Now go and kill that demon."

Chapter-1708: The Huntsman

Rain had taken off her winter coat, her light armor, and even her military jacket, leaving only the henley and the wool vest on. No amount of armor was going to protect her from the Awakened Demon, so she wanted her movements to be as agile and unobstructed as possible. It seemed a little poetic, as if she was proclaiming that there would be no retreat, only victory… or death.

It was also a bit funny. Awakened warriors were often shown preparing mentally for battle while donning their armor, but she was doing the same while taking it off. Such was the pitiful life of a mundane hunter.

The preparations had long been complete, the traps were laid. All Rain had to do was venture into the depths of the forest and face the demon.

Taking a deep breath, she went through a series of stretching exercises. She had always been nimble, but after years of training under the sinister shadow, her flexible body was like that of a snake… no, a gymnast. A very graceful, limber gymnast! That was a much better mental image.

Still, she had to be careful when going all out. Her mundane flesh was lagging behind her skill and training, so it was easy to damage.

"What are you, a ballerina?"

Rain glared at her teacher silently.

"Didn't you once tell me that you're the best dancer in the world… two worlds, even? So who's the ballerina?"

He coughed.

"Well, uh… if your teacher said it, then it's true! There was this one time I danced with a princess at a ball, and immediately after, she dragged me into a private room. No, wait… or was it me who dragged her into a private room? In any case, the two of us ended up in a private room!"

Her teacher smiled wistfully.

"And let me tell you, what happened in that room… ah, it was nothing short of life-changing…"

Rain stared at him for a moment, then pretended to be sick.

"Old pervert…"

He was offended.

"Who are you calling old?! No, wait, who are you calling a pervert?!"

She did not deign to answer, shaking her head silently. At the same time, though… Rain noticed that her previous nervousness was almost entirely gone. She felt calm and ready, as if her teacher's familiar nonsense could magically make any situation, no matter how dire, seem mundane and ordinary as well.

Rain took a deep breath and checked her weapons one last time.

She had already strung her bow. Her quiver was full of arrows — she had made the arrows herself, fashioning the arrowheads from the bones of Awakened abominations. Her javelin was ready to be used, while her dagger was freshly sharpened.

Finally, there was her sword. She drew the tachi from the scabbard and studied its blade.

At that moment, her teacher suddenly spoke:

"Wait a moment. For this hunt… I'll lend you something better."

He walked closer, and then bent down, reaching for the shadow of her sword.

In the next moment, something strange happened. Her teacher's hand seemed to reach into the ground and pull the shadow off it. Suddenly, her tachi didn't have a shadow anymore… however, there was an identical tachi in his hand, only made entirely of lusterless black steel.

Rain looked at it, suddenly feeling a cold chill run down her spine.

The black tachi… seemed sharp enough to cut the world in half, like a blade made of pure killing intent. It was as if she was looking at death itself.

And that eerie sword was tossed at her carelessly a moment later.

"Ah!"

Rain scrambled to catch it and grasped the black hilt. It was strange… despite the overwhelming feeling of cold and dark power the black sword emanated, it felt exactly like her own in the hand. The weight, the balance, even the tactile feeling of the leather ito.

She looked at her teacher silently.

It was easy to forget because of how easygoing and immature he was… but her teacher was immensely powerful. Actually, she didn't even know how powerful he was, exactly. It was only in moments like this one that Rain was reminded of the fact.

Pulling out a sword worthy of being wielded by a Saint out of nowhere? No matter how shocking, that was exactly the kind of thing her teacher would do.

She carefully sheathed the black tachi, making sure that it didn't slice the scabbard apart.

"This sword seems too powerful to be wielded by a mundane human. You didn't forget that I can't control my essence, did you?"

Her teacher shrugged.

"That's alright. It's infused with mine."

Rain nodded, then collected the things she was going to leave behind and placed them in a nook between the roots of the old tree, to be retrieved later. Her original sword went atop the neat pile.

She stood up, looked into the depth of the forest, and started walking.

As she did, her teacher spoke:

"That sword should be able to cut the flesh of an Awakened Demon even in your hands. Still, don't rely on it too much. Remember… the sword is just a tool. You are the weapon. You are the one who has to kill the enemy, not your sword."

Rain nodded calmly.

"I remember."

She cleared her mind of all distractions, focusing solely on the hunt.

The demon she was going to kill… was called the Huntsman, quite ironically. That was what the people in Ravenheart called him, but actually, the creature's proper name was Chalice Knight.

The reason why Rain and her teacher had chosen him was precisely because there was a lot of information to be learned about the Chalice Knights. These abominations were not independent Nightmare Creatures, after all — rather, they had been mid-rank minions of a Fallen Titan.

The Titan's territory used to be about a hundred kilometers away from this forest. Coincidentally, it lay between Ravenheart and one of the other large cities of the Song Domain, preventing the construction of a convenient road. A year or so ago, Song Seishan had battled the Titan and destroyed it, obliterating most of its minions in the process and scattering the rest.

Rain remembered that event well because there had been a series of missions issued by the town hall in the aftermath of the battle, all having to do with hunting down the remnant abominations. She wasn't quite strong enough to challenge them, but many Awakened cohorts were. So, the surviving minions of the slain Titan had been

swiftly eradicated.

All except for one Chalice Knight who had found his way into this forest. Despite the fact that the abomination had lost its monstrous steed, thus becoming much weaker, he still managed to decimate several cohorts that ventured into the forest to kill him.

Perhaps there was something special about this particular demon, or perhaps the Awakened warriors had come unprepared. In any case, they were forced to retreat, and the oddly fearsome Chalice Knight earned a foreboding nickname, the Huntsman.

Rain did not consider herself to be stronger than the Awakened fighters who had tried to slay the creature in the past. However, she was definitely much more cautious and prepared than they had been.

So, she was going to hunt the Huntsman.

Once she did, her essence would Awaken, and she would be able to start forming a soul core.

And once her soul core was formed… then, finally, she would be stronger.

Chapter-1709: Hunter's Prey

The Huntsman was so dangerous because he ruled the forest like a stealthy predator. He moved unseen and attacked from the mist and darkness, picking off his victims one by one. He also seemed to know the value of intimidation and mental pressure, displaying the mutilated corpses of his victims on the branches of the ancient trees for everyone to see.

Or maybe skinning corpses simply spoke to the abomination's aesthetic sensibility. In any case, his human enemies often faced him already shaken and rattled, which was a deadly poison for anyone going into battle.

Rain knew that she was approaching the creature's lair because she saw a human skeleton hanging in the trees, its bones clattering against each other in the wind. Her expression darkened.

However, she wasn't shaken. She wasn't rattled, either. Her mind was much too strong to be poisoned by fear — instead, fear only sharpened it.

'...I'll need to bury them properly after everything is over.'

She shivered — not because of the morbid scene, but simply because she was cold. The battle would warm her up, though, so it was alright.

Every time an Awakened cohort ventured into the forest, the Huntsman was in no hurry to attack. Sensing the threat presented by a group of experienced Awakened warriors, he stalked them silently or retreated into his lair, waiting for the night to come. Then, when impenetrable darkness shrouded the world, his own hunt would begin.

Rain was not a cohort of Awakened warriors, so she was pretty sure

that the demon would not wait to attack her. It was for the best — she knew that if she failed to slay the enemy before nightfall, her chances of survival would drop to zero.

And yet, the Huntsman had not shown himself yet.

What was he waiting for?

She frowned, then glanced at her shadow.

"Could it be that the demon is afraid of you, teacher?"

A calm voice resounded from the darkness:

"It is highly unlikely. I am very hard to notice when I'm hiding in the shadows. There is a much simpler explanation, don't you think?"

Rain nodded.

Indeed, there was. The Huntsman was not omniscient, after all. He simply had not noticed her yet.

Which was what she had been hoping for. Rain knew that she wasn't strong enough to face an Awakened Demon in a direct confrontation, which meant that she had to rely on traps to even the odds. The problem was that even luring such a creature into a trap was problematic, because he was much faster than her.

'Well, if he doesn't want to welcome me…'

She was going to have to announce her arrival.

Soon, the smell of blood and smoke permeated the forest.

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There was no sound. Not even a single branch trembled. And yet, there was a presence — a dangerous presence moving through the forest, somehow remaining unseen.

Rain could feel it. Her intuition, which she had honed through dozens of hunts, was telling her that a deadly foe was approaching.

Sitting on a branch downwind of where the smell of smoke was coming from, her skin smeared in ash to mask her scent, she was watching the forest intently. Even then, she was only using her peripheral vision to observe it — many Nightmare Creatures could sense when a gaze was directed at them, so she knew better than to stare.

It was for that reason that she managed to notice a small anomaly in the surrounding area.

'The frost…'

The patterns of frost on the ground were broken. It was as though someone heavy had walked past, leaving footprints on the frozen soil, and yet avoided her sight completely.

'He's… like a chameleon.'

Once she knew what to look for, Rain quickly managed to notice a subtle anomaly. There was a patch of air that seemed to be a little hazy, but still transparent, as if distorted by heat. But how could there be heat in this frigid cold? No, the almost unnoticeable distortion was the masked figure of the Huntsman, moving noiselessly in the direction of the smoke.

The demon was cautious and prudent, but not as prudent and cautious as she was.

That was because Rain was weak, and had no other choice but to remain humble.

'No wonder so many Awakened were defeated by this demon.'

This Chalice Knight was a bit special, indeed.

Luckily, Rain had known about that strange ability of his in advance. She had talked to the members of the cohorts who had ventured into the forest to slay the Huntsman in the past, and learned quite a bit about this abomination.

That was why she had come prepared.

She held her breath, feeling the world grow stark and clear.

Her battle-ready mind entered the state of clarity.

That state…

She had been quite angry at her teacher for how vague and confounding his explanations about the meaning of clarity were. But after finally mastering it, Rain finally understood every word.

Master the body, master the mind… the essence of combat was murder, and every action she took in combat only served one of two purposes — to kill the enemy or to prevent the enemy from killing her.

Something like that could not be explained with words, only learned in battle. However, once Rain truly understood that unfathomably deep, but simple truth, every battle she had fought after that was easier.

Time seemed to slow down as her perception expanded. Her thoughts accelerated, and at the same time, the scope of the world grew narrower, eliminating all unnecessary distractions. She could feel every minute detail of her environment with striking sharpness, from the direction of the wind to the slowly dancing snowflakes.

Down below, the almost invisible menace slowly approached the bonfire she had made with wet branches, and the butchered corpse of a Dormant beast she had laid as bait.

It was time to strike.

There was no way back anymore.

Drawing her bow, she finally allowed her gaze to fall directly on the empty space where the Huntsman was supposed to be, and let the arrow fly.

Rain had thought that her shot was immaculate, and almost impossibly swift. From the moment she nocked the arrow to the moment she let go of the string, less than a heartbeat passed.

And yet, frighteningly, that single heartbeat was enough for the demon to react. She couldn't see his movements, but the vague patch of subtly hazy air shifted at an impossible speed.

The arrow flashed past.

…But that was alright.

Rain had not been aiming at the invisible abomination, anyway.

Instead, she aimed at a burlap sack hanging above the bonfire. The arrow split it open, and fine powder poured into the air.

It was not gunpowder, nor was it some expensive alchemical concoction. It was simple flour.

However, when the cloud of flour ignited, it still produced a fiery flash. That flash couldn't be called a proper explosion, really, since there was no closed vessel to contain it, but it still served its purpose…

That was, to cover the Huntsman in soot.

Suddenly, his invisible form was not that invisible anymore.

In fact, whatever camouflage the creature had been using was broken by the rain of burning flour, and Rain finally saw the Huntsman in all his vile glory.

Chapter-1710: Daring Escape

The Chalice Knight resembled a human wearing a tattered suit of ancient armor that had turned green from rust. He towered at around two and a half meters of height, but seemed even taller because of the deer antlers attached to his closed helmet. The rusty helmet itself was fashioned to resemble the snout of a snarling beast, with deep darkness nestling in the crack of its visor.

There was moss growing here and there on the battered armor, and a ragged cloak, too weathered to retain any color, hanging from his shoulders like a torn banner.

The creature was holding a frightening battleaxe in his hand, its blade large and heavy enough to easily split a human in two.

The Huntsman… was like a dead knight that had crawled from under the roots of the forest that had claimed an ancient battlefield, ghastly and imposing enough to make Rain shudder.

Worse than that, the dark crack of his visor was already staring directly at her.

Her soul seemed to squirm under that gaze.

'Crap.'

Rain nocked another arrow on the string and prepared to draw her bow…

But before she could, the Huntsman had already reached the base of the tree that served as her sniper nest.

His dreadful battleaxe rose and fell. That dreadful strike was enough to make the mighty trunk of the ancient tree explode into a hurricane of splinters, obliterating a whole swath of it.

But, a moment later…

A sharp arrow fell from above and lodged itself into his knee. It struck precisely at the narrow gap between the bottom of the abominations's cuisse and the top of his poleyn — which were the armor elements responsible for protecting one's thigh and knee, respectively.

A pretty decent shot, considering the situation.

But Rain did not have any time to celebrate, because the tree was already toppling… and she was falling with it.

After a moment of weightlessness, the rope tied around her chest drew taut, and she found herself flying through the air.

If there was one thing her teacher had told her, it was that one should always leave themselves a path of retreat. Rain had never considered that climbing a tree would protect her from an Awakened Demon, so she naturally prepared a way to escape.

In this case, that way was swinging on a rope and flying between the trunks of terribly tall trees at breakneck speed. She had not carried a sizable length of silk rope all the way here in vain, at least.

As the wind whistled in her ears, Rain thought:

'This is going to hurt…'

Struggling to control her body, she spun at the last moment and used her legs to dissipate the shock of colliding with another tree at great speed. The other end of the rope was tied around one of its highest branches, which allowed her to swing like a pendulum... well, a badly designed pendulum, maybe.

She did not break her neck or crack her skull, which was a relief, but her feet were in agony. Ignoring it, Rain immediately cut the rope with her dagger and plummeted down, landing softly on the frozen ground.

There, leaning against the trunk of the tree, two things were waiting for her: her javelin, and another arrow.

Sheathing the dagger in one smooth motion, Rain grabbed the arrow and spun around, already drawing the bow.

The Huntsman was barreling toward her, so fast that it was hard to track his movements…

But still, he wasn't faster than her arrow.

With her mind clear, she could sense the movements of her enemy. So, she did not aim at where the abomination was, but at where it would be.

Another arrow pierced the air, striking at his other knee.

Sadly, this time, Rain's aim was a few millimeters off. The precious arrowhead struck the edge of the Huntsman's cuisse and shattered, only managing to slice some moss off the rusty green metal.

The Huntsman was an Awakened Demon, while the arrowheads of Rain's arrows were made from the bones of Awakened abominations. Theoretically, the demon's armor and the arrowheads were of the same Rank... but she herself was not. Strangely enough, that made her arrows weaker than the rusty green metal.

It had something to do with essence, laws governing the world, and will. Rain wasn't entirely clear on the details, but what it meant in practice was that she had to strike at the cracks of the abomination's armor... which she had failed to do, this time.

She did not waste time lamenting the mistake.

Grabbing the javelin, Rain… spun, and ran away.

She ran as fast as she could.

What bravery? What courage? There was no such thing on the battlefield, only strength and weakness, life and death.

In normal circumstances, outrunning an Awakened Demon would have been impossible, but there was currently an arrowhead lodged in one of his knees. It didn't matter that such a small wound was not at all dangerous for a creature of his Rank and Class — a joint was a

joint, and if there was something disrupting the joint's function, even a demon would be slowed down.

Rain had specifically fashioned the arrowheads in a way that would make removing them nearly impossible, unless the victim wanted to take a sizable chunk of flesh out with them. So even if the shaft of the arrow was broken, the damage still remained.

Granted, it would have been much better if both of the Huntsman's knees were hurt.

Because, now…

She really did not know if she would be able to escape his axe long enough to accomplish her goal.

'Run… run!'

Gritting her teeth, Rain did the unthinkable… she tossed away her bow. That was a terrible loss — not because she was afraid to lose it, but because the quiver of arrows she had hidden up ahead would be useless without it. But she had to sacrifice something, and her javelin seemed much more useful in a battle against such a large foe.

As for her sword… well, her teacher had given it to her. She would never discard it.

She felt incredibly lucky about leaving her coat and armor on the outskirts of the forest.

'Run, goddamn you!'

Rain did not have eyes on the back of her head, but she could feel the ground trembling, and hear the branches snapping behind her. In fact, the Huntsman was barreling directly through the trees, snapping the mighty trunks like matches. It was as though an unstoppable, inescapable behemoth was pursuing her, getting closer and closer. He was already no more than a dozen meters away.

A dozen meters… ten meters… six meters…

Rain's heart was beating wildly in her chest.

But then, finally, the trees receded, and she escaped into a vast open space.

That… was where she had wanted to fight the demon.

'Be more prepared. Control the battlefield, know the terrain, learn about the enemy. Take the initiative and don't make any mistakes. Have a clear mind and deadly resolve.'

That was the recipe for winning a battle against a demon… any battle, really.

So, this was the battlefield that Rain had chosen.

The open space in front of her was a swamp that hid in the depths of the forest.

Currently, it was frozen over, the treacherous depths encased in a layer of ice. The ice was covered by a thin carpet of snow.

Rain was light enough to walk on the ice without falling under its surface.

The Huntsman, though…

With his frightening size, heavy armor, and dreadful battleaxe, he was going to have a bit of a problem.

Feeling death approaching her from behind, Rain did not waste a single moment and stepped onto the hidden ice.

Chapter-1711: On Thin Ice

Rain was ready to step on the ice when something inside her screamed. Perhaps it was because of the subtle change in the sounds behind her, or perhaps it was because of the change in the currents of the wind.

Perhaps she had subconsciously noticed the shadow moving unnaturally around her.

In any case, she didn't hesitate even for a split second before throwing her body down. An experienced warrior did not allow themselves to be ruled by instinct, but they also never ignored it.

A warrior's instinct was the result of countless hours of training and rich battle experience, after all. Blood, sweat, and tears went into honing it into a life-saving tool.

Rain dodged, and in the next moment, her side was pierced by a flash of blinding pain.

She spun in the air and crashed into the ice, throwing herself into a roll. A moment later, Rain was already on her feet, sliding back as she held the javelin between herself and the enemy.

A muffled groan escaped from her lips.

The Huntsman was spinning his grotesque battleaxe, a few drops of blood marring its heavy green blade.

'Damn it.'

Rain briefly glanced down to assess the damage. It wasn't anything serious — the axe barely grazed her, leaving a long cut across her ribs. But if she had been even a little bit slower, it would have split her open like a log.

'More stitching...'

It was a little absurd, but she was more upset about having to mend her bodysuit than about receiving a wound. Her body was much more resilient than the threadbare bodysuit, after all.

"You bastard…"

As soon as the words left her mouth, the demon took a step forward.

Suddenly, they were surrounded by silence. The Huntsman entered the vast clearing, his armored boot sinking into the snow. Simultaneously, Rain backed away from his towering figure.

They were like a fearsome predator and its powerless prey, the predator preparing for a lethal lunge, the prey raising its quills in a vain hope to save itself. The heavy javelin usually gave Rain confidence, but in front of the dreadful master of the frozen forest, it seemed a fragile willow branch.

'Come on, come closer.'

She needed to lure him into the depths of the swamp.

But, to Rain's outrage, the abomination halted after barely stepping on the ice. The darkness nestling in his helmet moved mockingly, and he raised the axe, pointing it at her.

'Curse you!'

The demon was just as smart as she was. So, he seemed to have easily recognized the threat that a thin layer of ice hiding the treacherous swamp posed to him.

Rain had expected as much.

She smiled darkly and continued backing away, increasing the distance between them with each passing moment.

Demons were intelligent, but they were also absolutely crazy, like all Nightmare Creatures were. She could allow herself to walk away from the battle if she wanted to. But could the Huntsman allow a

human soul to escape from his clutches?

She didn't think so.

And indeed, out there on the shore of the frozen swamp, the demon's fingers twitched. He stared at her silently, making Rain's skin crawl, and then let out a frenzied growl.

Coming from inside the Huntsman's helmet, which was shaped to resemble the snarling snout of a beast, his growl sounded more than a little bit menacing.

Rain's mouth was suddenly dry.

"...Really? Wow. Come get me, then."

The demon struck the ground with his axe, sending a tremor through it, and then took another step.

An echoing, melodious sound resounded from below them as the cover of ice started to crack.

She prepared herself.

In the next moment, the Huntsman lunged forward with stunning speed. The wind howled as his massive body tore through it, the terrible axe rising to deliver a fatal strike.

It all happened very fast.

As the demon was advancing, his foot fell through the ice, and in the next moment, he plummeted down. Black water and pieces of ice flew into the air as if there was an explosion, and Rain felt the swamp tremble.

Cold drops pelted her face.

Of course, water alone was not going to slow the Huntsman down.

A human would have been rendered helpless by the need to struggle against its weight, but an Awakened Demon was powerful enough to shrug such a burden off without any effort. At that distance from the

shore, the water was only to the Huntsman's waist, so he continued moving forward after a momentary delay.

But, still…

It wasn't a lake or a river. There was no ground under his feet, only the treacherous mass of the ancient swamp. Although the abominations managed to prevent himself from sinking… for now… its speed still dropped.

More than that, the moment he fell through the ice, Rain was already moving.

And before the Huntsman could regain his bearing, the heavy tip of her javelin had already crashed into his helmet.

She did not get greedy with that attack. Greed was the third most common cause of death among experienced fighters, following directly behind arrogance and bad luck. After delivering a strong blow to the demon's face, Rain immediately pulled back and jumped away.

And just in time — a split second later, his axe whistled past the spot where she had stood before, colliding with the ice and splitting it.

The attack was much too fast for her to perceive and react in time. If Rain had not anticipated the danger and disengaged in advance, she would have died.

Her side burned with cold pain, but that pain only made her mind sharper. Her heart was beating steadily, pumping blood throughout her body. Her muscles seemed to have come alive, making her body light and alert, brimming with energy.

It was a state of absolute focus and awareness, so heightened that it couldn't last for too long.

'Let's see which one of us is the real demon…'

Brandishing her javelin, Rain grinned and escaped the cracking ice, already searching for a way to deliver another blow to the frenzied abomination.

Chapter-1712: Icebreaker

Less than a minute later, a vast swath of the frozen swamp had turned into a ravaged scene of devastation. The pure white snow was washed away, the ice was broken and shattered, its shards floating in the black water like dirty glass. The water itself was restless, boiling and rippling from the furious movements of the Huntsman and the escaping gas.

The swamp was trying to swallow the frenzied abomination, but was getting battered by him instead. The demon would sink deeper from time to time, but then tear himself from the insidious embrace of the marsh... even though that struggle allowed Rain to survive so far, it was not enough to grant her victory.

She was breathing laboriously.

Rain had continued to retreat deeper into the swamp, and the demon continued to pursue her like a demented executioner. She had delivered more than a dozen strikes to him, but none dealt any serious damage — even when her javelin pierced the cracks of the Huntsman's armor, it felt as if she was trying to cut wet fur.

Rain did do some damage to the hidden flesh of the demon, but not nearly enough to matter.

At the same time, her own body was not faring well. She had not been cut by the dreadful battleaxe again, so there was little blood… relatively speaking... however, there were bruises. In fact, after being tossed around by the furious power of the demon's blows, Rain felt like her entire body was one giant bruise, by now.

And that was even considering that she fought as cautiously and cowardly as she could.

The Huntsman had much longer limbs, and his battleaxe had much

more reach than the black sword her teacher had given her. So, even if Rain was willing to risk clashing with the abomination face-to-face despite being slower and weaker than him, he would have held a great advantage.

Stories like to speak about exalted skill and unbreakable resolve, but in a real fight, the outcome was often decided by the most mundane of things. Reach trumped skill, and weight definitely trumped will.

Well, perhaps it was different for the Awakened, whose power refused to obey common sense. But for someone like Rain, having a longer weapon meant emerging victorious more often than not.

Which was why she did not draw her sword yet, relying instead on the heavy javelin.

'It's alright…'

Her javelin was crafted from the same material as her arrows, and it was not as if a mundane human could not leave a scratch on the body of an Awakened abomination — in fact, it was entirely possible to slay one, just a bit hard.

Things would have been different if Rain was facing a Fallen Nightmare Creature, but then again, she would have never allowed herself to end up in such a situation. Her teacher tasked her with slaying an Awakened Demon precisely because it was not impossible for her to succeed.

It was just that…

The Huntsman had proven to be much tougher than she had anticipated. Rain had expected to be powerless against his armor, but even when she managed to bypass it, the result was minimal. It was as a though there was another layer of protection hiding behind the suit of rusted green armor.

Something had to change.

The demon was just as domineering and frightening as before, his movements just as foreboding… Rain, on the other hand, was starting to feel tired. Not only did she have to attack and dodge the terrible

axe, but she also had to be careful about the ice — if she fell under it, then she would die from her own trap.

And with more and more of the ice ending up shattered, staying away from the black swamp was becoming more and more difficult.

Her lungs felt like they were on fire. And not only because she was pushing her resilient body too far — the air reeked, as well, full of foul gasses released when the ice encasing the swamp was broken.

Something had to change soon…

Luckily, a change was coming up.

Not too far behind her, and drawing closer with each frenetic sequence of offense and retreat, was a twisted tree. The tree itself did not mean anything, but the fact that it stood in the middle of a swamp meant that there was enough soil there to support its roots.

There was a tiny island underneath the tree, which could save Rain, or doom her.

'To hell with it.'

Rain was about to take another step back, but then paused and stood her ground instead. Her body tensed like a powerful spring, and surged with strength. From her feet to her thighs, through her core to her shoulder, and finally into her arm — a powerful force was transferred and multiplied, and as Rain's torso turned, her arm flew forward like a whip.

She let go of the javelin.

The heavy weapon flashed through frigid air, dove under the Huntsman's axe, and plunged deeply into the crack on his rusty breastplate.

The power of her throw was dire enough to give the demon a momentary pause.

…Using that short moment, Rain turned around and dashed toward the distant tree. She knew that the abomination would follow… but it

was slowed down by the swamp, sinking deeper the deeper they ventured into it. By now, the dirty water was already above the Huntsman's waist, and his speed had dropped significantly.

Rain ran to the tiny island, pursued by the sound of breaking ice and surging water.

There was just barely enough time.

Reaching the tree, she ignored the quiver of arrows hidden beneath its branches — without a bow, they were all but useless now. Instead, she grabbed something else… a bottle of hard liquor her teacher had procured somewhere the day she turned twenty. Currently, there was a length of cloth dangling from the mouth of the bottle.

His voice suddenly resounded from the shadows:

"W—wait… what are you doing, ungrateful brat? That's my most expensive bottle, you know!"

Rain ignored the startled voice and produced a brass lighter. She wasn't fond of drinking, anyway… no, really, what had he been thinking, gifting a young girl alcohol? What kind of attitude was that for a teacher?

Had her teacher been a delinquent in his youth?

Igniting the cloth, Rain stood up and swiftly turned around.

The Huntsman was barreling toward her like a frenzied icebreaker. He had long torn her javelin from his chest and snapped it in two, leaving the broken pieces far behind.

For a moment, her heart ached for her trusty weapon.

Then, Rain gritted her teeth and tossed the bottle at the demon.

"Catch this, you rusty piece of..."

The Huntsman did not even bother to move his axe, swiping the bottle away with his gauntlet.

Of course, it shattered instantly, spilling burning alcohol all over his towering figure.

The flammable cocktail was not going to damage an Awakened Demon.

But that stench in the air…

There was a lot of gas trapped beneath the ice, and currently, all of it had been released, surrounding the abomination like an invisible cloud.

And when the bottle shattered, the cloud instantly turned into a sea of raging flame.

Of course, Rain did not see any of it, because she was already diving behind the twisted tree.

Chapter-1713: Fire and Ice

Swamps had a natural inclination to produce methane, which often remained trapped beneath the surface, forming voluminous bubbles of putrid gas. And those were only the swamps of the waking world, which were much safer than the marshes of the Dream Realm… well, at least they had been before the Dark Times.

In times of war, humanity had unleashed all kinds of weaponized horrors upon itself. So, today, there was no telling what kind of buried plagues could be released into the world if someone went around digging in the swamps of Europe or the Northern Quadrant.

The Dream Realm might have actually been safer, in that regard.

None of it mattered to Rain, though. What mattered for her was that methane was highly flammable.

And so, when the Huntsman shattered the liquor bottle, it ignited.

'Crap…'

Diving behind the tree, Rain pressed her body into the ground and covered her ears. In the next moment, she was momentarily blinded by a violent flash.

Then, she was assaulted by unbearable heat.

And then, the entire world shuddered.

'Ah?'

Rain was tossed into the air as the tree she had been hiding behind was obliterated.

That… was not supposed to happen. Marsh gas could ignite and burn, but not explode, and especially not so fiercely — at least not under

an open sky.

Perhaps the flames somehow reached a huge pocket of trapped methane, or perhaps it had something to do with the pockets of gas sticking to the surface of the ice. Perhaps the entire swamp was anomalous, and the gas she had set aflame itself was unnatural.

In any case, the result of tossing the liquor bottle surpassed Rain's expectations.

By a lot.

Crashing into the ground, she felt the wind being knocked out of her and let out a suffocated groan. Rolling in a mess of limbs, Rain fell into shallow water and came to a halt.

'That… hurt.'

She was hurt and dazed.

But there was no time for such frivolous things as pain and disorientation.

Opening her eyes, Rain pushed air into her lungs, choked on smoke, and slowly stood up.

The swamp around her had transformed.

It had been a plain of pure white snow once. Then, it turned into a chaotic mess of broken ice and surging black water.

Now… it was a burning inferno.

Ghostly flames danced on the surface of the glistening black water, and the air was full of smoke. The snow had melted, and the shards of ice were swiftly disappearing in the scorching heat. Everywhere Rain looked, darkness was intertwined with a fiery glow, and shadows undulated as they danced among the flames.

Rain was assaulted both by chilling cold and terrible heat. Her shirt was soaked in icy swamp water and sweat at the same time, which was a terrible combination. The ash she had smeared on herself to

mask her scent had been washed away.

The cut on her side was pulsing with pain.

That wound would have to be disinfected... a lot...

"Ah…"

She let out a long sigh.

At the same time, her sword hissed as it left the scabbard.

Gripping the black hilt with both hands, Rain took a step forward and left the shallow water behind, returning to the soil of the small island.

There was no fire where she had stood, and close to no flames where the twisted tree — now a smoldering stump — had been. However, a fiery wall rose at the opposite edge of the island.

As Rain assumed a stance, the wall of flame parted, and a lumbering figure emerged from the fire, stepping onto the island in the clangor of metal.

The Huntsman looked a little haggard. The moss covering his armor had turned to ash, and one of the deer antlers crowning his helmet was broken. There were cinders glowing in the cracks of his breastplate, and Rain's nose was assaulted by the stench of burned fur.

The abomination had lost his tattered cloak, but the dreadful battleaxe was still held firmly in his iron fist… even if its long shaft seemed charred.

Almost twice as tall as Rain was, the ancient demon towered above her like a grim reaper. The darkness nestled in the crack of his bestial visor was full of frenzied fury.

…But she couldn't help but notice that the Huntsman was hunching slightly, as if suffering from grievous wounds.

Her lips twisted into a dark smile against her will.

"What a pity. There's nowhere for me to retreat until the flames die… would you mind waiting patiently for a minute or two?"

Instead of answering, the Huntsman raised his harrowing axe.

Rain's dark eyes glistened.

"...Didn't think so. Well then, I'll just have to kill you bastard right here."

A split second later, she was already moving.

Of course, the Huntsman was moving as well.

And a lot faster than her, despite weighing at least five times as much.

But Rain knew how he was going to act, and where he was going to move. It was not because she had a prophetic gift or could read the abomination's mind. It was simply because she understood his physical limits from doing her research and observing him in battle, as well as because of her knowledge of combat.

She knew how to wield a polearm and how one proficient in the use of a great axe would most likely attack. She knew all the elements that comprised such a suit of full-plate armor, how they were fastened to one's body and to each other, and what limitations to one's movements they would cause.

She knew that the demon would favor his right leg, because his right knee was not damaged, and that he would protect the left side of his chest more, since the breastplate there was cracked, and the flesh beneath had already been pierced by her javelin.

Most of all, she knew that the Hunstsman was boiling with demented wrath. That mad frenzy clouded his judgement, and made his actions more predictable.

So, she had a few advantages of her own.

As the flames danced and the small island quaked from the heavy burden of the demon's footsteps, she dashed forward and met him

with a flash of her black sword.

The harrowing battleaxe would have split her in two if she had not sidestepped at the last moment. Rain had managed to evade the attack, albeit just barely… still, the length of the axe, and the Huntsman's arm length, were too great for her to strike at the towering abomination.

But she had not aimed at the demon's mighty body.

Instead, she aimed at the axe.

Just as the fearsome weapon flashed past her, the black sword fell in pursuit…

And severed the charred shaft cleanly.

It had avoided the metal bands reinforcing it and bit into the burned wood, slicing through it as if it was butter.

The axe blade sunk into the muddy soil, and the Huntsman's balance was suddenly disrupted without its weight.

Now holding only a severed shaft in his hands, the demon staggered and fell heavily to one knee.

The ground quaked.

In that moment… Rain could finally reach his body with her sword.

Chapter-1714: Apex Predator

The enemy was in front of her, kneeling, and momentarily vulnerable.

Who knew how long that vulnerability would last? The demon would most likely regain his bearing a heartbeat later.

Everything inside Rain screamed for her to attack, to throw her body forward and slay the abomination before that happened. After all, she could not be sure that there would be another chance later.

Adrenaline flooded her bloodstream, and her heart thundered feverishly. Her pupils widened, her mind drowning in excitement, fear, and frenetic urgency.

But, at the same time, the memory of the teacher's arrogant voice rang in her ears:

"Bruise? What do you mean, it will leave a bruise? Listen, disciple… you should be grateful to your kind and gentle teacher for educating you so tenderly! The last time I made such a mistake, I was stepped on by a mountain. Now that left a bruise!"

It was the mark of a skilled warrior to keep a cool head in the middle of the fiercest of battles. And so, she suppressed her excitement, ignored her fear, and cast away her sense of urgency.

'Don't be greedy… greed will get you killed. It is a sin, and only those strong enough to bear the consequences have the right to be sinful…'

Rain did not abandon her caution and attacked calmly.

The tip of her black sword slid into the seam of the Huntsman's breastplate, plunging deep into his side.

This time, there was very little resistance. Unlike her javelin, the dark tachi pierced the demon's flesh almost effortlessly.

But instead of leaning into the thrust or twisting the blade to wreak more damage, Rain immediately pulled it back and jumped away.

And just in time.

Although the Huntsman seemed momentarily dazed, and his weapon had been destroyed, his fist was already tearing the air with stunning speed. If Rain had been a split second too slow to disengage, her head would have been turned into bloody pulp. As it was, she had enough time to block with the dark tachi, and received the harrowing blow on its blade.

She was thrown backward like a rag doll.

Which was the intended outcome. If Rain had been stubborn and tried to stand her ground, her body would have received the bulk of the impact. But by allowing her to be carried away, she dissipated the force greatly.

…It still hurt like hell.

It felt like every bone in her body was about to burst.

But they didn't.

Rain was tossed back into the shallow water once again and skidded in the mud. The icy water washed away her sweat and numbed the pulsing pain in her side, which felt almost pleasant.

'Ah… I need to stand up…'

This time, it took her a little longer to gather herself.

Feeling the mud starting to pull her down, Rain groaned and rolled onto her stomach, then staggered to her feet.

The black tachi rose into a high stance, sending drops of dirty water flying.

'How badly did I wound him?'

It had to be a pretty terrible wound… the black sword created by her teacher was even sharper, deadlier, and much more frightening than she had imagined. If the Huntsman had been a human, he would have been dead by now, his heart pierced by the dark blade.

But he wasn't… he was a Chalice Knight, a demon from the retinue of an ancient titan that had haunted these lands for thousands of years.

So, even though the wound Rain had delivered him was ghastly, it was definitely not enough to bring the abomination down.

She had done something equally important, though.

She had destroyed his axe, effectively disarming the horrid demon.

Looking up, Rain stared at the Huntsman.

The abomination was still kneeling, his hands resting in the mud. Fetid blood was spilling from the seams of his scorched armor. The bestial snout of his snarling helmet seemed even more terrifying now, and there was dark liquid flowing from between the green fangs.

'Come on…'

Disarming the Huntsman was not that important, in and of itself. Sure, without the great battleaxe, his reach would shrink, allowing her to engage the abomination in melee. But he was more than strong and ferocious enough to tear her apart with his bare hands.

Rain could hold out for a few seconds and survive a handful of exchanges, but attempting to fight the demon up close would inevitably result in her death.

However…

Chalice Knights were not simple abominations. These towering, armored warriors of the bygone era harbored a ghastly secret.

Rain had not learned that secret from talking to the Awakened who had ventured into the forest and faced its fearsome overlord. Instead,

it was something that everyone in Ravenheart knew… that she had known from the day Seishan, Queen Song's daughter, killed the terrifying leader of the Chalice Knights.

The tales of that battle had spread far and wide in the Song Domain. More than that, detailed information about the surviving abominations was provided by the town hall when it issued the extermination missions.

The bestial helmet of the Huntsman was no mere decoration. It hinted at his true nature… because all Chalice Knights were shapeshifters.

There was a rabid beast living in each of them, and when the ancient warriors faced a powerful enemy or were in danger, that beast came out.

The dreadful demon that she had been fighting so desperately did not even show the true extent of his harrowing power, yet.

But now… now that his axe was destroyed and his blood was pouring into the mud, he would.

And that was Rain's best chance to kill him.

Out of there, in front of her, the kneeling Huntsman let out a husky growl. His limbs flinched, as if struck by a painful convulsion.

Then, his growl grew into a deafening roar.

The demon's armor cracked… no, it was his bones cracking underneath it. His spine bent, and dark fur suddenly burst from the seams of the rusted armor.

Long claws tore through the metal of his gauntlets.

The transformation had started.

It seemed gruesome, and gruesomely painful. It was also deeply frightening — not only because Rain knew that the unleashed beast would easily rip her to shreds and devour her, but simply because watching something human-like suddenly change into something

inhuman was terrifyingly appalling.

None of that mattered to her, though.

What mattered to Rain was that, from what she knew, the transformation of the Chalice Knights took some time to happen. Even if it was just a couple of seconds… in a battle, those seconds were like an eternity.

She had been waiting to stake her life on that eternity the whole time.

As the Huntsman's bestial roar reverberated across the burning swamp, Rain dashed forward.

Her steps were light and swift.

Before the demon could assume his true form, before the echo of the roar was swallowed by the shadows…

She reached the kneeling abomination and brandished her black sword.

The dark blade hissed coldly as it cut apart the world.

And also the Huntsman's neck.

The darkness nestling in the crack of his visor gazed at her silently as his growl abruptly stopped, and the bestial helmet flew into the air, a fountain of dark blood spilling from it in a spiral as it spun.

It was a clean cut. The horizontal slash was performed with perfect form, thanks to the thousands of practice swings she had performed under the watchful guidance of her tutors.

The Huntsman's severed head fell into the water and sank into the swamp with a ripple.

His towering body swayed slowly, and then collapsed.

…Rain swayed, as well, and sprawled in the mud next to it. The tension drained from her body, but so did all her strength.

She breathed hoarsely, staring at the distant sky.

The flames were dying down, but she was still surrounded by terrible heat.

'Well… it's good. I won't freeze to death yet, at least…'

In the smoky silence that followed, a sudden noise resounded, sounding indescribably misplaced in this hellish scene.

It was the sound of applause.

Rain tiredly turned her head and stared at her teacher, who had finally deemed it necessary to crawl out of her shadow.

His voice was unnecessarily loud.

"Congratulations! You have slain an Awakened Demon, Chalice Knight!"

He smiled and added quieter, his tone turning warm:

"...Well done."

Chapter-1715: There Are No Washing Machines in Ravenheart

'Well done…'

Rain had just killed an Awakened Demon, but hearing her teacher's praise was strangely just as validating. Or rather, it made the act of slaying the Huntsman feel more meaningful… in any case, it was a nice feeling.

Too exhausted to move and hurt all over, she simply lay in the mud and rested. Her gaze was directed at the sky, which was as empty as her mind. Feeling too lazy to think, Rain simply stayed still and savored the moment, unbothered by the encroaching cold.

By then, the ghostly flames had been mostly extinguished, with only a few small tongues of fire dancing here and there above the ravaged swamp.

While she was spacing out, her teacher disappeared somewhere. Soon, he emerged from the shadows, carrying her bow, backpack, and other things she had left on the outskirts of the forest.

Placing most of it on the ground, her teacher then walked over and carefully covered her with her winter coat.

"Here, don't catch a cold."

Rain smiled faintly, enjoying the warmth.

Her teacher, meanwhile, approached the corpse of the Huntsman, looked at it curiously, and gave it a little kick. Then, he circled it slowly, mumbling some nonsense in a hushed tone:

"Chalice Knights… Chalice Knights… wait, don't tell me. Were these the poor bastards who drank Jade Queen's nectar? Soon, there was nothing but bestial need left… huh, they might be. What fools! Even my little sister knows not to drink everything given to her by shady characters…"

'It's you… you're the shady character!'

Rain wanted to scoff, but then decided against it.

Instead, she asked:

"Teacher… can I Awaken now?"

She knew the answer, of course, but hearing it again would give her confidence.

He smiled.

"Well. You've already made great progress and learned how to sense your essence. I'm pretty sure that absorbing the soul shards of this demon will be the final straw and serve as a catalyst to make your essence Awaken. Of course, that alone won't make you an Awakened."

Her teacher looked at the mud with a finicky expression, then reached into the shadows and pulled out an opulent wooden chair out of them. Placing it on the ground, he sat down and let out a satisfied sigh.

"The problem is that there will be no vessel to store your essence, and no bridge between your soul and your body… at least that is how I understand it. However, you will be able to control your essence — and by controlling it, you will be able to create such a vessel, which is itself the bridge. A soul core.

It will require time and effort, but with your level of enlightenment, I am sure that you will manage splendidly. When you do form a soul core… that is when you'll undergo a rebirth and become Awakened."

Rain listened to his voice silently, then sighed.

"...How long will it take?"

Her teacher chuckled.

"I have no idea. That wholly depends on you… but, from what I am told, learning to control essence is the hard part. Forming a soul core is relatively easy, albeit tedious. So… a few months? A year? We'll have to wait and see."

'I bet I can do it in a day.'

Rain didn't voice her defiant thoughts and smiled.

"What comes next?"

Sitting comfortably on his luxurious chair, her teacher smiled.

"Ascension is a step of rising above one's mortal nature. You will have to accumulate power by improving the quality of both your soul essence and your body. That can be achieved naturally, by slowly refining the essence, or by slaying powerful enemies. Once your essence reaches a qualitative change, the last step is to reform your soul core. That's… a bit tricky."

He shook his head.

"The easier part of the process is learning how to access your Soul Sea. The harder part… sadly, it requires the knowledge of a soul refining technique. In the past, many such techniques were known to us humans, but sadly, that legacy has been lost. These days, everyone simply relies on the Nightmare Spell."

Rain raised an eyebrow.

"So, what? I can't Ascend? Should I just go and jump into a Nightmare?"

Her teacher furrowed his brow.

"Can't Ascend? Who do you think your teacher is? Of course, you can Ascend! The fact that no one else has a soul refining technique doesn't mean that I don't, or that I can't invent a new one from

scratch."

Rain turned her head and stared at him dubiously.

'So does he have one, or is he going to invent one?'

Well, it didn't really matter to her now. She was not even an Awakened yet, so Ascension seemed distant enough to not feel real.

Even the Awakening…

Rain sighed.

"...I still want to challenge a Nightmare."

She had decided that she wouldn't, but that didn't prevent her from fantasizing about becoming a carrier of the Nightmare Spell.

Her teacher stared at her somberly.

"What? Why?"

She pursed her lips.

"I just want to, okay? Fine, it's great that I can form a soul core and Awaken! But will I really be an Awakened? What kind of Awakened doesn't have an Aspect? Not to mention… not to mention that I won't be able to receive any Memories from the Spell! All those Awakened in Ravenheart are walking around in suits of shiny armor and wielding enchanted weapons.

Clothes that clean and repair themselves! Quivers that never run empty! Best of all, they can just summon and dismiss their equipment instead of having to lug it around while climbing mountains!"

The Path of Ascension was too laborious without the Spell. Rain was willing to accept that finding her Aspect and Flaw would take her a long time, perhaps even longer than becoming a Master.

But the Memories… simply not having to launder her clothes would be worth it!

Her teacher suddenly laughed.

"So this is what it's about? Memories?"

Rain glared at him for a few moments, then gestured weakly to herself.

"A weird apparition like you might not care, but look at me… soot, ash, sweat, swamp water, mud, blood, and gods know what else! This is what I have to deal with after each hunt. There are no washing machines in Ravenheart, either! I'll need to wash it all by hand or pay a laundress… that's after I pay the healer to patch me up.

And speaking of patching things up, these clothes need to be mended, too!"

Her teacher shook his head, laughing.

"Oh… oh, I see. So it's not devastating enchantments and mystical powers that you envy, you just don't want to do laundry…"

She opened her mouth, speechless.

"That's not true!"

He smiled crookedly.

"It's not?"

Rain gritted her teeth.

"...I also don't want to carry all that weight on my back!"

Her teacher leaned back and laughed again.

"Unbelievable…"

After having his fill of laughter, her teacher shook his head and stood up. Looking around, he picked up a piece of charred wood and scribbled something on it with his nail.

His nail cut the wood like a diamond blade.

A few moments later, he nodded in satisfaction and tossed the piece of wood to Rain.

"Here, catch."

She raised a hand and caught the piece of wood, then hissed quietly when her side pulsed with pain.

'Ouch…'

Bringing the strange gift to her face, Rain studied the letters carved on its surface.

They read:

"You have received a Memory."

She frowned.

"What's this?"

Her teacher shrugged with a smile.

"Treat it as a Memory coupon. What, did you think that only the Spell could reward people with Memories? Well, wrong! Your teacher is awesome, so he can make Memories just fine. Let's see… you killed an Awakened Demon this time, so I'll make you an Awakened Memory of the Third Tier."

Rain blinked.

"You can make Memories?"

He returned to his chair and grinned.

"Sure! And, unlike the Spell, I'll even customize it to your liking. More than that… listen, I really don't want to badmouth the competition… but the Spell, it really has no imagination whatsoever. Why limit Memories to powerful weapons, enchanted armor, and mystical tools? There are so many mundane things that would make for an amazing Memory! That bodysuit of yours?

I'll Memorize it, no problem. Do you want a pillow that is always cold or a magical toothbrush? Your teacher can make that happen, as well."

He looked at her with a smug expression.

"Hell, I can even make a roll of toilet paper into a Memory. If you don't go overboard, it will never run out."

'Why the hell is that bastard talking about toilet paper…'

Rain stared at her teacher for a while, then blinked a couple of times.

"Are you telling me that you have been able to create Memories this whole time?"

He nodded.

"Strange question, but yes, sure."

Slowly, Rain's blood started to boil.

"So why… the hell haven't you made me any Memories, then?! Was watching me suffer fun for you?!"

He glanced at her with an offended expression.

"Huh? What are you talking about? I was always planning to arm and equip you. It's just that you are still a mundane human. Until you form a soul core and Awaken, your soul can't even contain Memories. Blame yourself for being so slow!

What's so hard about becoming the first human in history to Awaken naturally, huh? Do I ask for much?!"

She took a deep breath and turned away, staring at the sky again.

'What an insufferable, cheapskate deity! Who... who can make Memories...'

Slowly, a few grandiose thoughts entered her mind.

After a while, though, Rain sighed.

"Well, it's good enough. Teacher is amazing! Sure, I won't have an Aspect, but having Memories is already great. Receiving them directly from someone instead of earning them from the Spell is a little weird… I guess, it's not much different from how Legacies inherit Memories from their clans, though."

Her teacher frowned, then chuckled suddenly.

"Hey, now that I think about it, aren't you a Legacy yourself? Your big brother can provide everything a Legacy clan can, and much more on top of that."

She looked at him scornfully.

"Oh? Teacher is like a Legacy clan now? So, do you have a Legacy Relic, then?"

He tilted his head with a smile.

"A bunch of them, actually."

Rain blinked a few times.

'Does he really?'

Actually, she wouldn't be surprised.

"...Well, what about a Citadel, then?"

He grinned.

"A Citadel? Sure, I have one of those… it's a huge temple built of black marble, shrouded in eternal darkness. Granted, it's a bit of a fixer-upper, but what can you do? My Citadel is almost as old as the universe. The ambience there is great."

She stared at him silently.

"That's great. Speaking of great, since it's teacher, there has to be a Supreme in our clan, no doubt. Should I consider myself royalty? Might as well, right?"

Her teacher coughed in embarrassment.

"Ah… well… technically, our clan doesn't have a Sovereign at the moment…"

Rain's eyes gleamed with triumph.

'His capacity for nonsense has a limit, after all!'

"...but we do have a Supreme Devil. I used to bully the little bastard a lot in the past, but now that he's all grown-up, it's not very fun."

She took a deep breath, turned away, and stared at the sky.

The sky was indifferent and beyond reach.

'...I give up.'

Chapter-1716: Grain of Sand

After a while, Rain felt rested enough to move. She rose from the ground with a grimace and went about taking care of her wounds.

Her teacher had made a fire from the splintered remains of the twisted tree, so neither of them had to freeze in the cold. Rain disinfected the cut on her side, then wrapped it tightly in a clean bandage. That would have to do until she returned to Ravenheart and found a healer.

Usually, she would have been lamenting the need to pay one, but there was a sizable reward promised to anyone who managed to slay the Huntsman. Not only could Rain afford a decent Awakened healer, but there would be enough coins left for her to replace the broken javelin, and maybe even upgrade a few pieces of her equipment.

'No, wait… actually, I don't need to worry about that anymore?'

Rain still had hope of Awakening swiftly. Even if she failed to do it before returning to Ravenheart, there would be no more hunts in the next few months — she already had everything she needed to form a soul core, so the best course of action would be to hole up in a safe place and patiently work on becoming an Awakened.

Once she was an Awakened, her mundane equipment would not be of much use. She would be able to draw a much more powerful bow, wear armor crafted from much heavier mystical materials, and even wield Memories.

Her entire arsenal would need to be changed. She would have to purchase a lot of things.

…Suddenly, Rain did not feel rich anymore.

She was so poor!

Full of sorrow, Rain put on her winter coat and approached the remains of the Huntsman. She stared at it for a while, then glanced at her teacher.

"Should we harvest his armor? It should sell for a lot of coins."

He scratched the back of his head.

"Who's going to carry it all the way back to Ravenheart, though?"

Rain sighed.

'How can a deity be so useless?!'

"...Yeah. Still, we should take the axe blade, at least. To prove the kill at the town hall."

That axe blade alone would sell for a hefty amount of coins.

She fished the giant blade from the ground and attached it to her backpack. Her teacher, meanwhile, looked at the remains of the dreadful Chalice Knight and snapped his fingers.

Several shadows suddenly rose from the ground and sliced the carcass apart, cutting the rusted armor like paper.

Rain didn't look at the bestial features of the corpse as she harvested the soul shards and sat down, staring at them solemnly.

There were three of them… the glimmering crystals were not too large, but to her, they meant the world.

'This is it, then'

She had been striving desperately to reach this moment for four long years. Those years had been full of pain and hardship... but also joy, satisfaction, and fulfillment. And now, the final stretch of the road was right in front of her.

Her teacher sat on the ground across from her and smiled with encouragement.

"Go on. You worked hard to be here."

Rain looked at him, remained silent for a moment, and smiled back.

"I did."

With that, she unsheathed her knife and crushed the soul shards one after another with its pommel.

She felt a stream of power flowing into her soul.

And then… her soul suddenly surged.

Rain struggled to describe the way she felt with words. It was as though her entire body was suddenly permeated by a cool, vibrant, nurturing flame. However, that flame simply passed through her flesh, unable to touch it.

"W—what… what is happening?"

Her teacher was looking at her with keen interest. The gaze of his onyx eyes was strangely intense.

"I can see it. Your essence is Awakening. It is as though your soul, which had been dim and drowsy, is suddenly coming to life. A soft radiance is spreading, and it is lively."

He remained silent for a moment, and then spoke in a calming tone:

"Try to control it. Guide it throughout your body, following the roadmap of your major blood vessels. Your blood is circulating because of your heart… but you don't have a soul core, which is like a heart for soul essence. So, for now, you'll have to substitute it with your will."

Rain took a deep breath and closed her eyes, imagining the map of her body. She could feel her essence flowing freely, chaotically, with no shape or form. So, she slowly extended her will and tried to guide it.

She had never been able to control her essence before. It had always felt like trying to push a boulder to the top of a mountain… the

boulder was dead weight, it was cold and reluctant to move. The moment she lost concentration, even a little, it rolled back to where it had come from.

But this time, her essence felt alive and responsive. It followed her guidance, flowing slowly in a complicated cycle. At first, there was a lot of chaos and colliding currents in its flow, but as Rain deepened her concentration, the torrent of her soul essence grew increasingly stable and orderly.

Her teacher chuckled in amazement.

"Wow. On the first try? You're doing great!"

Rain did not open her eyes.

"So… how do I form the core?"

His voice was calm and confident, like an anchor that she could use to keep steady:

"The method is simple. Once you can make the essence circulate freely, increase the speed. Make it rush like a mountain river. Then, increase the speed even more, until it's spinning inside your body like a raging whirlpool. Make it condense under the pressure of its own weight and the pull of the rotation. You don't need to form the entire soul core all at once… one grain of sand is enough.

Next time, you will create one more. And then one more. Sooner or later, the density of your essence will reach a critical point, and a soul core will be formed."

Rain smiled.

She could imagine it vividly… it was a beautiful process. Like stars and planets forming from incandescent stardust.

She concentrated fully, making the essence circulate faster, and faster, and faster. The greater its speed, the more willpower she needed to keep the raging force of the whirlpool under control.

'Come on… a little more…'

She could feel a condensed mass of energy slowly forming in the place where her heart would have been. It was not solid yet, but also not as ethereal as the usual state of soul essence. More like… a shimmering liquid.

And at the very heart of that mass, where the pressure was most crushing, something solid was slowly being born.

A tiny crystalline gemstone… so small that it could only be called a grain of sand.

"Ah!"

Rain opened her eyes and shuddered, her entire body drenched in sweat. The whirlpool of essence dissipated, and she sprawled on the ground in utter exhaustion. Her chest rose and fell heavily, as if she had just run a marathon.

The mental fatigue was even worse.

Her teacher raised a fist.

"Success! You did great!"

But Rain was full of bitter disappointment.

'A single grain of sand… did I really boast that I'll form the soul core in one try? Ah, so embarrassing! Thank the gods I didn't say it out loud!'

How long would it take her to create enough of these tiny gemstones for them to merge into a core? A month? A year?

Rain wanted to groan.

…But doing that would undoubtedly make her teacher way too happy. She couldn't let the enemy win!

She sighed, and then slowly sat up.

'I'll stay home for an entire month, let mom pamper me, and work on Awakening slowly.'

Disappointed? Who was disappointed? A whole month… or even several months… of doing nothing and being spoiled rotten. No biting cold, no blood and sweat, no hideous abominations and revolting corpses. Just eating well and meditating in peace. It was a dream come true!

Wouldn't it be great, to rest for a few months while being absolutely safe, with nothing terrible happening?

'It sure would!'

Her teacher suddenly looked at her with suspicion.

His onyx eyes narrowed.

"What is this… I sense a familiar disturbance. Hey, you didn't just think something stupid in your head, like 'finally, the worst of it is over' or 'that demon is definitely dead, nothing bad will happen'... did you?"

Rain raised an eyebrow and put on an innocent expression.

"No? Why would I? Only a complete fool would think something like that in the middle of the Dream Realm..."

He studied her dubiously for a moment, then exhaled slowly.

"Well... good. And, you know, don't use such harsh words. Some people — very smart people! — were known to make small mistakes like that in the past. Anyway...

time to head back to Ravenheart, then... "

Chapter-1717: Rustle

Rain collected her things and hoisted the backpack onto her shoulders. The axe blade was terribly heavy, which messed with her balance a little… but she could handle it. The frightful black sword her teacher had given her was already gone, and her tachi regained its shadow. She studied the familiar sword for a few moments, then sighed and sheathed it smoothly.

Rain was ready to leave.

…But she didn't.

"Uh, teacher. We might have a problem."

He turned to her and raised an eyebrow in confusion.

"A problem? What's the matter?"

She hesitated for a moment, then awkwardly scratched the tip of her nose.

"Well, you see. That explosion was much more powerful than I had expected. So… all the ice is broken. How am I supposed to get back to shore?"

He stared at her for a bit, then glanced at the ravaged landscape of the vast swamp.

Indeed, the little island was surrounded by nothing except mud and black water, with not a single intact piece of ice in sight. The deadly expanse of treacherous sludge stretched all the way to the distant shore.

Her teacher lingered for a bit, then sighed and approached her.

Crouching, he pointed to his back:

"Climb on, brat."

Rain didn't make him ask twice. There were ways to traverse a swamp, but none that were both safe and timely. Not to mention that she had just disinfected her wound and didn't want to get it wet and dirty again.

Plus, her battered body was exhausted. Why would she refuse a piggyback ride offered by a powerful deity?

Climbing onto her teacher's back, Rain wrapped her arms around his neck and smiled.

He lifted her like a feather, not showing any strain at all despite how thin his body looked, and headed for the swamp.

"Ah… how humiliating… a divine shadow like me being reduced to carrying ungrateful mundane girls… gods are truly dead…"

Ignoring his grumbling, Rain rested her head on his shoulder and allowed her consciousness to drift into a relaxed state. The familiar sound of her teacher's voice was almost like a lullaby.

Walking to the edge of the island, he didn't even try to slow down and stepped directly into the muddy water. However, his foot never plunged into the murky sludge — instead, the shadows moved and coalesced into a glossy black plate under it. Then, another plate appeared as he took a step.

Like that, her teacher walked across the swamp as if he was walking on a paved road, the black plates dissipating behind him after a few moments. The water sloshed and surged, but never managed to touch his leather boots.

"Huh, that reminds me of that time we fought the Drowned in the lost temple of Fallen Grace… back when I was still wearing the Serpent King's crown… who knew that I would end up becoming a swamp rickshaw one day? Damn, life is sure full of irony…"

Rain did not know what the words Drowned, Fallen Grace, and Serpent King meant, but they sounded exciting. Was her teacher a king once, in ancient times?

…No, knowing him, it was more likely that he had stolen a king's crown and wore it to gloat and boast about his nefarious deeds.

The walk to the shore was both comfortable and uneventful. Rain could have climbed off her teacher's back once they reached solid ground, but he simply continued to carry her without saying anything, and so, she didn't say anything either.

Perhaps he saw through her bravado and realized that her condition was worse than she was letting on, and that she was too exhausted to hike through the forest while suffering the pain of her wound.

Still…

After a while, Rain spoke:

"We should take down the corpses of the fallen Awakened and give them a burial."

Usually, the Queen would have taken the dead. But the Huntsman must have prevented them from leaving on a pilgrimage to her palace, and as a result, their bones had been left unattended.

Her teacher stopped.

Rain couldn't see his face, but she felt a subtle change in his mood. Suddenly, the shadows populating the frozen forest seemed much deeper, and the world felt much darker.

Her breath escaped as a cloud of cold vapor.

'Does he not want to bother with burying them?'

"Climb off."

He bent his knees, allowing Rain to stand firmly on the ground. She was a little confused.

"What…"

But then, she heard it. A branch snapping somewhere behind her.

Placing her hand on the hilt of her sword, Rain turned around and looked back.

There, she saw several human figures walking in their direction. They seemed like a cohort of Awakened… no. A Master and his retinue, perhaps? One, two, three people… one of them was waving his hand in a friendly gesture…

Before Rain could discern any details, though, something strange happened.

Her teacher's hand appeared from behind and covered her eyes.

She froze.

'W—what… what…'

Something was very wrong.

His voice sounded very calm… too calm, even, which only made Rain feel more nervous.

"Hey, brat. Listen to me very carefully. From now on and until I tell you otherwise, no matter what happens, don't open your eyes. Alright?"

She nodded slowly.

"Yes, teacher."

He remained silent for a moment.

"Alright. Stand here and don't move."

With that, her teacher removed his hand. Rain's eyes were tightly shut, so she couldn't see anything, but she felt him walking past to stand between her and the approaching people.

Their steps were drawing closer.

'Wrong, wrong! This is very wrong!'

Rain was not stunned by the fact that he had covered her eyes. What

truly disturbed her… was the fact that her teacher had not retreated into the shadows.

In all the years that she had known him, he had never, ever shown himself to other people. It was to the point that Rain had considered him a hallucination at first.

But now, her teacher remained in the open in front of absolute strangers.

Why?

Her silent panic was interrupted by his bright, carefree voice:

"Greetings! Who might you be?"

The sound of steps halted, and a deep baritone answered in a friendly tone:

"Greetings, greetings! I am Master Sean, and these are my companions, Master Skif and Awakened Ardon. We were on our way back to Ravenheart… are you headed that way, as well?"

Rain frowned.

'Master Sean? Master Skif?'

She had not heard of these Ascended before. Granted, there were thousands of Ascended in the world, but still. Each of the Song Domain's Masters was like a minor celebrity, especially those in Ravenheart.

There was something else that seemed strange about these people, too. She was standing there, frozen, with her eyes closed… but they did not seem to care enough to react in any way. Wouldn't it be natural to ask what she was doing?

Her teacher lingered for a few moments.

"Yeah, we were on our way back to Ravenheart too."

Then, there was a long stretch of silence.

Eventually, Master Sean asked, his voice sending a chill running down Rain's spine, for some reason:

"You look a little familiar, young man. Say, have we met before?"

The tone of his voice was perfectly friendly, and so were his words. But she suddenly felt suffocated, as if there was something eerily, maddeningly wrong with it all.

Her teacher's answer was a little somber:

"As a matter of fact, we have indeed met before. Although I doubt that you'll remember. In any case, why don't you and your friends continue onward? Let's part on friendly terms and go our separate ways. How about it?"

There was another lengthy silence.

Shivering, Rain heard a strange rustle come from the direction of the three strangers. Their surroundings were slowly turning colder.

'What was that rustle?'

"How about it… how about it. How how how about it."

Master Sean's voice still sounded human, but his speech had turned strangely incoherent.

Another voice joined, its mannerisms and intonations too similar to the first:

"We are on our way back to Ravenheart. These are my companions… Master… we are on our way. How about it?"

Rain was still stuck on her previous thought, unable to throw it out of her head.

'What... what was that rustle?'

She had never heard a sound like that before.

Just at that moment, the disturbing rustle grew louder, and a third

voice added amicably:

"These are my companions."

"My companions..."

"My companions."

'That rustle...'

"How about..."

"...How about you become my companions, too?"

Her teacher took a deep breath. Rain could hear his voice turning dangerously cold:

"Listen here, bastard…"

She had never heard such coldness in his voice before, and the unfamiliarity scared her.

"You might have managed to claw your way out of Dread's Tomb, but so did I. You might have survived in the depths of a thousand hells, but so did I. So save me the theatrics and be on your way. Otherwise, I'll stop being gracious and skin you alive."

Rain shuddered.

'Skin… skin him…'

Suddenly, a thought flashed in her mind.

'The Skinwalker!'

The Great abomination that had been the nightmare of humanity for the past four years!

A Great… A Great abomination…

Three of the indescribable horror's vessels, no less!

Her terror was so vast that she couldn't even move. All Rain could do

was keep her eyes closed and tremble.

'I'm dead, I'm so dead…'

No, death would be a mercy.

At that moment, Master Sean — Skinwalker's vessel — spoke with a hint of curiosity in his voice:

"You... whose companion are you?"

Her teacher scoffed.

And then, the world quaked.

Chapter-1718: Sounds of Battle

The world quaked, and then, Rain was suddenly enveloped by absolute darkness.

It was as if an impenetrable wall rose to surround her from all sides. The deafening cacophony of terrible sounds coming from the outside was muffled and dampened by that wall, and nothing but slight tremors reached her.

For the moment, at least, she was safe.

But those sounds…

Feeling a cold dread grasp her heart, she took a shaky breath and tried to comprehend them.

There was the sound of trees snapping. There were the screams of the air being torn. There was the roar of the ground being upturned.

These were the sounds that she could recognize.

But there were other sounds, as well.

Inhuman howls. Chilling groans that sounded like… like the world itself was weeping. Eerie and revoltingly organic rustling, as if a mountain of flesh was ripping as it expanded while consuming itself.

And many more that Rain simply could not describe, and was afraid to fathom.

The ground was shaking violently, and she was struggling to stay standing.

Her fingers turned white on the hilt of her sword.

'Teacher… be safe. Please…'

But how could anyone stay safe when facing the Skinwalker? Countless people had fallen to its menace and were consumed, becoming vessels of the abomination's corruption. Mundane humans, Awakened, Masters… even Saints.

Not even the Sovereigns could eradicate this living curse.

Shrouded by darkness, Rain realized how painfully weak and helpless she was.

Just a few moments ago, she had been full of pride, praising herself for slaying an Awakened Demon.

But now, she remembered that in the world of the Nightmare Spell, she was nothing but an ant.

An ant who couldn't even do anything when her teacher was fighting to protect her.

'Strong… I want to be strong.'

She had not changed at all. She was still the same girl who had been powerless to protect herself, let alone anyone else, when the tide of Nightmare Creatures descended on her school.

…The world continued to scream and quake for several minutes.

Then, an eerie silence suddenly enveloped it. The tremors stopped, and the terrible sounds ceased.

Rain remained motionless, keeping her eyes closed.

She didn't dare to think about how the battle had ended. The thought of imagining her teacher… her teacher not being there anymore was too appalling. More appalling than what would happen to her if he was truly gone.

Suddenly, the wall surrounding her disappeared. She knew that it had because light suddenly shone through her eyelids, and cold wind scraped against her face.

The air was permeated by the smell of wet wood and soil.

'Please...'

A moment later, a familiar voice spoke from somewhere near:

"Brat, you can open your eyes now."

The relief Rain felt at that moment was strong enough to make her sway.

She slowly opened her eyes and looked around, then froze in shock.

'N—no way…'

The frozen forest… was gone.

It was obliterated entirely, and everywhere she looked, nothing but a barren expanse of flattened and upturned land could be seen. The trees had been reduced to mere splinters, and the ground itself was broken, with dark fissures covering it like bottomless scars.

Here and there, the splinters were wet with blood. Buried under them, broken corpses of the unfortunate Nightmare Creatures who had populated the forest lay, their macabre sight mercifully hidden by the debris.

That scene of devastation stretched as far as the eye could see.

The entire landscape had been drastically changed in a matter of minutes, redrawn by the fury of the harrowing battle.

The scale of the dreadful destruction… was simply unfathomable.

Rain took a trembling breath and finally looked at her teacher.

He was standing a few steps away, as nonchalant as ever.

His hair was ruffled, and there was a smudge of something dark on his cheek… but other than that, he was the same pale, roguish scoundrel she knew.

Of course, Rain struggled to perceive him in the same light.

She had known that her teacher was a powerful being, of course…

but this was the first time she really witnessed his power.

Where were the vessels of the Skinwalker?

Rain tried to compose herself.

"The… the Skinwalker?"

Her teacher remained silent for a few moments, then silently took a step back.

Behind him, three human corpses were piled on top of each other, each missing the head and with a deep wound where their hearts should have been.

'Three vessels of a Great Nightmare Creature…'

Rain swallowed.

Her teacher had just killed three Great abominations. Just like that.

There was something else. Did she imagine it, or were there tiny shards of a broken mirror glistening on the ground in front of the corpses?

"W—what… how…"

Trying to comprehend the situation was too disturbing. So, Rain would rather think about its consequences… her teacher had revealed himself, and although they were far away from Ravenheart, such a drastic change of landscape would not escape notice.

Which meant that they had to get out of here as soon as possible.

Receiving the reward for the Huntsman was also not an option now. Rain would have to keep the fact that she was anywhere near this place a secret… it was a good thing that she had not shared her plans to hunt the demon with anyone.

No one could know that a being who could slay three vessels of the Skinwalker lived in her shadow. She would have to return to Ravenheart and lay low for a few months… luckily, that was what

she had wanted to do, anyway…

Her teacher sighed.

"I know what you are thinking about. But, Rain… sadly, you are wrong."

She tilted her head a little.

"What? Why? Because you defeated the Skinwalker?"

He lingered for a moment, then shook his head and pointed to the three corpses.

"No. Drawing attention to myself is not a good thing, sure. But actually, we have a bigger problem. This guy, Master Sean… I recognize him. He was an Ascended from the House of Night."

Rain failed to understand what he was trying to say.

"...So?"

Her teacher sighed and rubbed his temples in frustration.

"Right. You don't know. Well… let's just say that members of the House of Night should not be anywhere near the territory of Queen Song right now. And they must have been fairly close to Ravenheart, moving in secret, when the Skinwalker got them. So… I am afraid that you and I have seen something that we were not supposed to see."

She hesitated for a few moments, remembering everything that her father had mentioned about the House of Night and its relationship with the Song Domain. Was there some problem between the two? It didn't seem that way…

If anything, the Song Domain seemed to be moving toward having a problem with the Sword Domain, while trying hard to maintain a friendly relationship with the weaker House of Night.

All of it was very mysterious.

But, at the same time, Rain understood the underlying meaning of what her teacher had said.

"Something that we were not supposed to see. Got it. Promising that I won't tell anyone is not going to work, I guess? So… just how big of a secret is it?"

Her teacher's face was a little somber.

"Big enough for Clan Song to erase any witness from existence. Well… not any witness. But a mundane girl with no backing? They won't hesitate to silence you even for a split second."

Rain felt a cold chill run down her spine.

'Damn… the royal clan?'

Why would Clan Song pay attention to someone as small and insignificant as her?

She gritted her teeth and looked at him stubbornly.

"I do have backing, though. My father works for the government… his rank is pretty high now, too. Surely, Clan Song won't want to spoil their relationship with the government because of something like that?"

Her teacher smiled wistfully.

"Ah, the naïveté of youth… first of all, you are overestimating the significance of your father's position. Second of all, you are overestimating the significance of the government. And lastly, you are underestimating Clan Song. Who says that anyone would be able to prove anything after they make you disappear?"

His smile turned colder.

"In fact, they won't even have to make you disappear. Technically. There's a guy among them who is much worse than the Skinwalker. He can destroy your soul and wear your body like a suit, coming to family dinners and gossiping about boys with your mother. No one will suspect a thing."

Rain shuddered.

Slowly, the magnitude of the trouble she had gotten herself into was starting to dawn on her.

'Crap… crap. Crap!'

Who had made her think all those stupid things earlier? Spend months in absolute safety? Rest and relax while working on Awakening at a leisurely pace? Be pampered at home?

She had been such a fool!

Rain cursed quietly, stared at the three corpses for a while, and then asked her teacher in a hopeful tone:

"So what do we do?"

Her teacher was... whatever it was that he was. He had to have a solution, without a doubt.

Suddenly, she felt a lot calmer.

Her teacher remained silent for a while, then smiled.

"What to do, indeed. Well… I am sorry to tell you this, Rain, but you can't show your face in Ravenheart for a while. You'll have to disappear before they can make you disappear. We need to go somewhere where they won't be able to find you quickly, and spend some time there."

She closed her eyes and asked, her tone turning a little grim:

"Where can I even go? Even if I can survive a solo journey to another Citadel, there is no city in the Song Domain where the royal clan doesn't have eyes. Crossing into the Sword Domain is not an option, not that I would want to leave my family behind. I can't return to the waking world without the help of a Saint, and even if I could, locating me there would be even easier."

Her teacher scratched the back of his head with a thoughtful expression.

He lingered for a while, then glanced at her with a strange expression.

"...What about one of those road crews? They are safe enough for you to survive, with more than enough mundane humans for one more to not draw attention, and best of all, far removed from all Citadels. They're lacking manpower, too, so no one would ask any questions. If I were you, I'd get myself hired as a laborer there and hide in the crowd."

A sly smile appeared on his face.

Her teacher remained silent for a moment, then added with a chuckle:

"In fact, wasn't there a huge crew being assembled to construct a road east? You know, to Godgrave. Why don't you join that one?"

Rain sighed.

'Why not, indeed?'

Chapter-1719: Story Time

"Mom… moooom…. mommyyyy…"

Effie patted Little Ling on the head and smiled.

"What do you want, dumpling?"

She was sitting in a comfy wooden chair, staring at the wooden ceiling absentmindedly. The little boy cuddled comfortably on her lap, hugging her like a little monkey. He looked up at her with his bright eyes and grinned sheepishly.

"Story!"

Effie laughed.

"Story? Which story?"

Little Ling was suddenly very thoughtful. He remained silent for a while, a comically concentrated expression on his face, and then beamed.

"Mommy defeating the giant!"

She hugged him and shifted slightly, then said in a deep voice:

"Alright, alright. Listen then! A long time ago, in a faraway land, six evil Saints imprisoned Hope in a tall tower. Hope was very lonely in the tower, and cried bitterly. So, your mom and her friends decided to defeat the evil Saints and rescue her."

The image of the damp stone cell under the Chalice Temple flashed in her memory. The smell of blood, the whimpers of the other girls the War Maidens, driven to madness by the Demon of Desire, were slowly "training" to death.

The graveyard of swords surrounding the ancient temple.

She chased the ghastly memory away and smiled warmly.

"Noctis, the Wicked Warlock of the East! Uncle Kai, who was a brave warrior from the Ivory City back then! Aunty Cassie, who was a wise priestess of the Night Temple! And, of course… your mom, who was a little girl! These were the four heroes who ventured to rescue Hope. Oh, and there was someone else, as well.

A nameless shadow who had escaped its master and became friends with Noctis…"

Effie only had a vague recollection of the shadow devil who had followed Noctis, but it seemed rude not to mention him.

Her adorable son giggled.

"Huh? What's so funny?"

Ling Ling giggled again.

"Mommy is not little! How can mommy be little?"

She smiled.

"I was a little kid once too, you know! Actually, I was a little kid twice. In any case, after we, the four heroes, met each other and swore to save Hope, the evil Saints learned about it and sent a messenger to scare us. It was a huge giant! As tall as a mountain, with a body made of polished steel… but your mom and her friends weren't afraid at all.

That was because the kind priestesses of the Goddess of Life had taught me the secret art of slaying evil giants, you see…"

Effie continued to tell the fairy-tale version of her Second Nightmare, just as she had done a hundred times before. For some reason, this story was one of Ling Ling's favorites… maybe because the very idea of his mom being a little girl excited him endlessly.

She had no idea why, but looking back, it had indeed been a bit

exciting. Effie had spent her actual childhood either in a hospital bed or in a wheelchair, so getting a little taste of what it meant to be a healthy kid was... special. Even if it was in the depths of a ghastly Nightmare.

Of course, she had removed all the distasteful parts from the story, replacing them with fantastical and exaggerated adventures. Flying ships, eccentric sorcerers, fire-breathing dragons, and a happy ending. The sugar-coated version of the Nightmare of Hope had everything one needed for a great fairy tale!

"...And so, Cassie dropped the flying ship right on the evil giant's head! Boom! Crash! Bang! The ship shattered into a thousand pieces, and the giant fell down, making the ground shake. Auntie was perfectly fine, of course — she had jumped away just in the nick of time and glided down with the help of her magical rapier.

A huge shadow was still…"

Just then, the door opened, and a handsome young man walked into the room. Way too handsome, even!

Effie smiled at her husband and exhaled slowly, trying to maintain a relaxed expression.

"Daddy!"

Little Ling jumped off her lap and ran to hug his dad. Luckily, this time, he remembered to control his strength.

Picking the boy up, Ling's Dad smiled at him and then glanced at Effie.

He was hiding it well, but she could see that the smile did not reach his eyes.

"It's time?"

Her husband nodded, and then looked at the little boy in his arms.

"Hey, wolfie. How about you and dad go on a little adventure?"

Little Ling seemed to be torn.

"But mommy didn't finish the story…"

His dad laughed.

"The evil giant story? I'll finish it for her. Or, how about it? Dad has an evil giant story, too! There are really too many evil giants in the world, now that I think about it. This one was named Goliath, and only had one eye…"

Effie sighed, then rose from her chair and stretched slowly. Then, she followed her husband out of the room.

They were currently in their spacious, sunlit cottage. It had been built from natural wood by none other than him, and had a simple, cozy charm to it. The cottage was the centerpiece of the entire farm, which was a rather idyllic place.

A beautiful view of the emerald meadow opened from the front porch.

Of course, the meadow had transformed in the last four years. There were fields, vegetable gardens, barns, and livestock corrals. There were also a few other buildings, some of them hidden in the forest.

Most of these buildings were built of wood, but some included more advanced materials — the latter extended underground, and served a different purpose.

These buildings included barracks, armories, and all the other essentials of a military base.

That was because the Beast Farm often moonlighted as a dimensional carrier for the Wolf Army.

"Boss!"

"Boss is here!"

"Atten-tion!"

A scattering of soldiers stood at attention. Most were hidden from sight, but some had gone out to stretch their legs.

Little Ling waved at them excitedly, causing a wave of smiles.

"Uncles are funny…"

Effie nodded at the nearest soldier and said in a quiet tone:

"Assemble the troops. ETA is one hour, so be ready to be deployed at a moment's notice. We are going to spearhead the breaching maneuver by the Western Quadrant Defense Forces. The mission is just as the briefing said — push the abominations back and establish a fire line. Funnel the civilians, if there are any left, into the designated safe zone."

The soldier — a rowdy-looking man who had been under her command from the first days of the deployment to Antarctica — nodded with a roguish smile.

"What about the big bastards, boss?"

Effie inhaled slowly.

"Don't worry about them. The government is sending the entire cavalry this time… we'll take care of the Gate Guardians. And also…"

She frowned and glared at him.

"Watch your language in front of Ling Ling, you reprobate. Aren't you already a Master? Why are you still so brainless?"

The man blinked a couple of times, then gave her a terribly guilty look.

"Oh… sorry, boss… I forgot…"

He didn't seem too sincere, though, no doubt itching to accuse her of hypocrisy and double standards.

Effie shook her head and pushed him away.

"Go get ready."

With that, she turned to her husband and son, putting on a bright smile.

"Shall we go?"

She took her husband's hand, and a moment later, the three of them disappeared from the meadow.

Instead, they appeared in a room with alloy walls, situated in the depths of a government fortress. The furnishings were sparse, but there was a large screen displaying the arid landscape of the Western Quadrant on one of the walls.

Little Ling looked at the sand dunes with interest.

"Daddy, what is that?"

His dad smiled.

"This is a desert, wolfie. We are in the Western Quadrant… aren't you a lucky kid, to get to travel all around the world and see all kinds of places?"

The boy was thoughtful for a moment.

"Daddy… aren't you a little silly? It's a picture. Little Ling has seen a lot of pictures already."

Effie's husband laughed.

"I guess you are right…"

He glanced at Effie and nodded. She remained silent for a bit, then patted Little Ling on the shoulder and said in her usual carefree tone:

"Dumpling… mom has to go to work now. Be a good boy and listen to dad, okay?"

He grinned and waved at her absentmindedly.

"Bye, mommy! Have fun at work!"

A second later, Little Ling was already asking his dad about deserts and sand. The handsome young man exchanged a poignant look with her, silently mouthed three words, and then took their son out of the room.

Outside, a high-ranking government envoy was already waiting for them.

Left alone, Effie took a deep breath and said quietly:

"I love you, too."

Then, the smile slowly disappeared from her face, replaced by a grim expression.

She remained motionless for a while, then nodded and summoned her armor. Soon, her athletic figure was covered by a skintight layer of polished metal, as if she had been dipped in liquid steel. She also summoned the Starlight Shard, shaping it into two strips of white cloth. One was tied around her waist, the other covered her chest.

Effie was ready for war.

Well… as much as anyone could be ready for war. Which, in her experience, was not much at all.

Picking up the Black Beast Locket, she hung it around her neck and walked to the door.

In the corridor outside, two figures were waiting for her.

An annoyingly stunning man with auburn hair and green eyes, and a chillingly beautiful woman with pale skin and raven-black hair.

Effie erased the grim expression from her face and smiled mischievously.

"Hey there, handsome… oh, and you too, Kai. Guys, you won't believe what I saw in Bastion! Princess found herself a boyfriend! At least I think that she found him… she might have just kidnapped the poor man to do unspeakable things to him. I know I…"

She froze suddenly, looked behind her with a cautious expression, then relaxed visibly and added in a quieter tone:

"...I know I would, if I wasn't such a prim and proper, virtuous married woman!"

Chapter-1720: Hard Day at Work

Just a few minutes later, a majestic dragon with scales that resembled the midnight sky was flying over the endless sea of dunes, devouring distance with stunning speed.

Effie and Jet were on his back, looking south with somber expressions.

After a while, Effie sighed.

"The situation has already changed?"

Jet nodded.

"Yes. The city wall is breached. Western Quadrant defense forces are on approach, but the Call is wreaking havoc with their tech. The Awakened vanguard was attacked by one of the lesser Gate Guardians and managed to put it down, but their advance was stalled. So, we will arrive first."

Soul Reaper maintained a neutral tone, but Effie could see that she was in a grim mood.

"It's not your fault. Don't beat yourself up too much."

Jet glanced at her and smiled.

"My fault? Of course, it's not my fault. I am not someone who feels bothered by such things, anyway."

But despite her tough-girl routine and carefully constructed facade of a cynical salary woman, she was bothered.

Effie had gotten to know Soul Reaper Jet a bit during the Southern

Campaign, but they became really close during the Third Nightmare. And in the four years since, their friendship and comradeship had continued to blossom.

Jet… was a professional, first and foremost. She wasn't really someone with a bleeding heart — the opposite, actually — but she took her responsibilities very seriously. As such, her cynical loyalty to the mission of preserving humanity was quite ironically much greater than the noble intent of most ardent idealists.

She had already been doing her very best as a Master. But now that Jet was a Saint — one of the five Saints serving the government — the scale and scope of her responsibilities were much greater.

While Effie and Kai mostly dealt with military and diplomatic issues, simply executing the orders, Jet was much more knowledgeable and experienced. As such, she was involved in the administration and decision-making process of the government, influencing what orders all of them received.

The government was in turmoil, too. It was in flux, drifting on the currents of history. Four years ago, the higher echelons of the government had made a decision to throw vast resources into rapidly developing its presence in the Dream Realm… where the future was.

That was why Effie was almost permanently stationed in Bastion, while Kai spent most of his time in Ravenheart.

Jet, however, had been against that strategy. She had insisted on keeping the government Saints in the waking world, spread across the three remaining Quadrants, to lessen the inevitable losses as much as possible… even at the cost of the future inferiority of the government's position in the brave new world of Domains and Sovereigns.

It was not that she disagreed with the notion that the future of humanity lay in the Dream Realm… it was just that she advocated for a different allocation of resources.

Sadly, she had failed to turn her opinion into policy.

If she had, the current disaster could have been avoided, or at least lessened.

Effie sighed.

"You're angry. I can smell that you're angry. Well, guess what? There's nothing better for treating anger than a good slaughter. And we'll be drowning in abominations in a few minutes, so… there's no day like today…"

Jet chuckled.

"You are right. Sure. But also… let's not use the word 'slaughter', okay? Makes me queasy."

At that moment, Kai's pleasant voice resounded in their heads:

[Ladies, if you feel queasy and are going to be sick, please wait until I land, at least. Really, don't go around despoiling my scales… I have an image to uphold…]

Effie grinned.

"Oh? What about your image? Who are you trying to impress, Queen Song's daughters?"

The dragon didn't respond to her provocation. Instead, he lingered for a while, and then asked:

[How is Aiko doing?]

Effie sighed.

"Come ask her yourself. She's still pretending to be angry. Oh… but she's doing fine, by the way! Her new boss is kind, handsome, and treats her very well."

Kai answered nonchalantly:

[I'm glad. As long as she's doing well.]

A few seconds later, he asked in the same neutral tone:

[...Just out of curiosity, how handsome are we talking? What about his style? Who makes his clothes?]

Effie grinned and chose not to answer.

In front of them, the sea of dunes slowly turned into a desolate plain, with a vast, dried riverbed cutting it like an endless scar. Far away, on the opposite side of the immense chasm, a large city stood where the river's shore had once been, shrouded in haze.

Their banter abruptly stopped.

The city was burning, with towering plumes of black smoke rising into the piercing blue sky. Even from that distance, Effie could see the signs of cataclysmic devastation. The toll of human lives must have been terrible.

Kai, with his incredible sight, could see much more. He didn't say anything, but his silence suddenly seemed sorrowful and forlorn.

Effie gritted her teeth and looked away.

"Do you see it, Kai? Was the last transmission accurate?"

The dragon folded his wings and rushed toward the ground.

His voice was even.

[Yes. Seven Gates. Six of them Category Three… one Category Four. The Gate Guardian of the latter seems to be a Great Devil.]

He paused for a moment, then added:

[The city is overwhelmed, a horde of abominations is rampaging on the streets. The local garrison seems to have fallen.]

Jet closed her eyes for a moment.

"It's good, then."

Kai asked quietly, the emotions in his voice suppressed:

[...Good?]

She nodded.

"Yes. If the abominations are rampaging, it means that there's still someone alive."

A moment later, the dragon landed on the ground, raising a cloud of dust. Jet and Effie jumped off his back and approached the edge of the dry riverbed's slope.

Out there below them, the hastily assembled army of the Western Quadrant was assembling into a formation to assault the fallen city. In front of the mundane soldiers, the battered Awakened vanguard was finishing off a wave of Nightmare Creatures that had wandered away from the burning ruins.

They had noticed the flamboyant landing of the great dragon, and were now looking back, cheering and waving their hands in the air.

Kai's fame preceded him.

Effie cracked her knuckles and asked, her voice uncharacteristically somber:

"A Great Devil… can we even handle something like that?"

All three of them had become immensely powerful after Transcending. The battles they had won were beyond count, and the Nightmare Creatures they had killed were beyond measure… and yet, they had never faced a horror like that before.

Only the Sovereigns had.

Facing a Great Devil was a first for them... and could very well become the last.

A relaxed smile appeared on Jet's face.

"What's the matter? If push comes to shove, we'll just die. Well… the two of you will die. I'm already dead."

Above them, the dragon scoffed. His magnificent voice resounded above the desert, making Effie's heart tingle...

That was just something Kai's draconic voice did, even if he did not use his Aspect Abilities.

"Still. We should try to stay alive… well, Effie and I should. You just stay in one piece, Lady Jet."

She chuckled.

"Alright. As we've discussed before, Kai will support the Western Quadrant forces in their advance. Effie and I will spearhead the assault, push back the abominations, and engage the Gate Guardian. There's nothing else to say. Godspeed!"

The beautiful dragon nodded its great head, then pushed himself off the ground and glided gracefully toward the assembled army.

Jet looked at Effie, already summoning her scythe.

She lingered for a moment, and then said in a tone that was a little gentler than usual:

"But seriously… don't die, Effie. Nightingale and I can die, but you can't. You know why. There are people waiting for you to return."

For a moment, Effie felt her heart tremble… just like it did every time she went into battle.

It had been easy to risk her life before, when she was young. But now, she had things to protect, and people whom she did not want to and could not allow herself to leave. Every time death snarled in her face, Effie felt… guilt, and shame.

And fear.

What was she doing on the battlefield when her husband and son were somewhere else, waiting for her?

Why was she being so stupid when she could have remained safe behind a Citadel wall, in their idyllic cottage, allowing someone else to fight, and bleed, and die in her place?

But then, she remembered.

It was precisely because of Little Ling and his dad that she was here.

Because someone had to prevent the world from collapsing on their heads and burying them under the rubble. Effie didn't particularly trust someone else to not mess everything up, so she had to build a world where her son could live a decent life with her own two hands.

Thankfully, her hands were quite strong.

If you wanted to do something right, you had to do it yourself.

Looking at Jet, Effie grinned.

"Why do you always talk about dying, big sister? Not everyone is like you! I'm not planning on kicking the bucket any time soon. That would be such a tragedy… imagine all the food I would not be able to eat!"

Laughing lightly, she shook her head…

And activated her Transformation Ability.

…A moment later, a titanic figure clad in polished steel rose from the dust, shining brilliantly under the incandescent sun.

Chapter-1721: Footsteps of History

Effie rose to her full height, towering a hundred meters above the desert. She was like a colossus cast of lustrous steel, the gorgeous lines of her athletic body shining under the blinding sun… a beautiful war deity rising to face the tide of monstrous abominations.

The white fabric of the Starlight Shard rippled in the wind.

Expanding the two Memories to fit her giant size cost a significant amount of essence, but it was worth it. Sadly, the same could not be said about the rest of her arsenal — not that there were a lot of Memories in her possession that could accommodate her Transformation. Even those that could were too weak to justify the expenditure.

Especially because Effie had other ways to spend her essence.

As soon as her Transformation was complete, she activated her Ascended Ability. Instantly, every soldier at the bottom of the dry riverbed — those that could see her, at least — felt their hearts beating faster. Their spirit and body were reinvigorated, while their strength, speed, agility, endurance, and resilience were greatly enhanced.

But that was the good thing about Effie's Transformation… it was hard not to notice a hundred-meter-tall colossus, especially one as striking as her. Her Ascended and Transcendent Abilities synergized beautifully to make sure that anyone on the battlefield could see her at any moment, even in the midst of a furious melee.

As long as she was on the front line.

The loud, reverberating roar rose from the riverbed as thousands of

soldiers, both mundane and Awakened, chanted in exhilaration:

"Raised by Wolves!"

"Saint Athena!"

"War Beast is here!"

Their impassioned voices were full of resolve and grim determination.

And as they looked at her, Effie felt her essence being slowly replenished.

'Well, at least someone is in a good mood.'

Looking past the exultant soldiers, she gazed at the burning city. From her current height, Effie could see the eerie fissures of the Nightmare Gates surrounding it like seven ghastly siege towers. One of them was especially tall, reaching even higher into the sky than she did.

There were several gargantuan figures moving in the sea of Nightmare Creatures. The Great Devil was not the only calamity unleashed by the seven Gates — there were other Gate Guardians, as well.

Two of them were even Titans.

'A Great Devil, a Corrupted Tyrant, two Fallen Titans, and a swarm of Terrors…'

One way or another, today's battle was going to end up in the history books. It was not quite the Chain of Nightmares, but definitely the worst crisis the waking world had faced since the Southern Campaign — by far.

What would the history books tell?

That on that day, the forces of humanity triumphed valiantly over a dreadful enemy?

Or…

That on that day, humanity mourned the loss of many of its most brilliant warriors?

Even now, on the precipice of the battle, Effie could not tell.

'...To hell with that.'

She grinned and kneeled, then placed the back of her hand on the ground, the open palm facing the sky.

Who cares about history? This battle might seem dreadful, but it was destined to become an insignificant speck in the tapestry of horrors that awaited humanity in the coming decades. In the near future, there would be a hundred, a thousand battles much more terrible than this.

By the end of it all, there might be no one left to read history books, let alone write them.

Such exciting times! She was definitely not going to miss them.

[Cassie… are you watching?]

There was a moment of silence, and then a response came, as calm and relaxed as ever:

[I am.]

Effie smiled.

[...Watch well.]

It was Cassie's job, after all, to witness and remember everything.

Down below, on the ground, the tiny ant that was Jet soared into the air and landed gracefully on her palm. Effie rose to her feet, gazed ahead, and took the first step forward.

The ground quaked under her titanic footsteps.

She leaned forward and pushed off, breaking into a sprint. The sight

of the beautiful steel colossus running was both magnificent and terrifying, the sheer scale of it all escaping imagination.

Awash in the echoing war chant of the advancing army, Effie leaped over the vast battle formation — the marching mundane soldiers, the wings of lumbering MWPs, the heavily armored tanks, the Awakened phalanx — and crossed the dry riverbed in no more than a dozen great strides, making the world quake.

Then, she was among the Nightmare Creatures.

Standing on her palm like a beautiful toy soldier, Jet shouted:

"Don't slow down! Proceed to the designated drop point!"

Effie answered with a scoff.

"When have I ever slowed down?"

Her voice was like the thunderous song of a divine war horn.

…And that was with her keeping it down. Jet was tough enough to withstand the full volume of Effie's voice, but if a mundane human happened to be too close, they would easily be crippled or outright die under its pressure. So, she had developed a habit of staying silent or speaking softly when assuming the godlike form of the militant giantess.

A moment later, her foot descended on a swarm of Nightmare Creatures, ruthlessly crushing dozens of them in one fell swoop. Some had survived, and were already trying to crawl up her shins, their fangs and claws scraping fruitlessly against the polished steel.

Her armor was a Supreme Memory of the First Tier, though, so none of their attempts amounted to anything. Even if the armor was breached, Effie had her Awakened Ability to fall back on. As great as her offensive might was, her defenses were even more astonishing… in fact, Effie was often tempted to say that she was practically indestructible.

Of course, she never did. Saying something like that was just inviting trouble.

There were all kinds of Nightmare Creatures out there. Many of them had means of bypassing physical defense, or could deal entirely different types of damage. The moment a powerful Awakened became arrogant was usually the moment they died.

The Spell whispered into her ear:

[You have slain…]

[You have slain…]

[You have slain…]

Ignoring the sonorous choir of its voice, Effie leaned forward a little and delivered a powerful kick, pulverizing an especially large abomination.

The creature must have been at least a dozen meters tall, and would have looked like a towering behemoth to the advancing soldiers. But to her, it was no bigger than a large rat. Its body disintegrated into a disgusting torrent of bloody liquid, and before that liquid splattered across a vast stretch of the riverbed's slope, Effie was already past the foremost wave of the Nightmare Creatures.

Nothing but devastation was left in her wake.

[You have slain a Corrupted Monster, Maw of Kanakht].

A moment later, she reached the city barrier.

It was quite inferior to the great walls surrounding NQSC. Not all human cities were siege capitals, after all — the true siege capitals had been constructed and received that title during the Dark Times, and there were just a few of them left standing in the world.

Of course, all human cities had been turned into highly advanced strongholds after the descent of the Spell, both to keep the Nightmare Creatures out and to make them habitable in the aftermath of the previous era. Still, the scale of their defenses varied.

The ruined city in front of Effie had quite a robust wall once upon a time, but now it lay in ruins. The streets were obscured by smoke,

and countless abominations were rampaging under its suffocating shroud.

From this close, she could hear a terrible cacophony of crumbling buildings, bestial roars, sporadic gunfire…

And human screams.

There were indeed survivors there, below her.

Which was why she had to be careful.

"To your left!"

Jet's shout was very timely.

Turning her head, Effie saw a wide highway piercing into the heart of the city. There was a fortified railway in its middle, with a mess of overturned train cars laying on the tracks. The highway itself was crowded by military vehicles… all empty and painted red by blood.

This was where the city garrison forces had tried, and failed, to stop the tide of abominations after the walls fell.

What was important to Effie, though, was that she would be able to use the highway to reach the heart of the city without trampling countless civilians to death and toppling damaged buildings.

Paving a bloody path through the horde of abominations, she stomped her way to the highway. Countless abominations perished under her footsteps. Those that were more powerful were crushed to death in her grasp, torn apart, or splattered across the concrete.

Their assault was like a dark tide. Some were large enough to pose a threat to even someone as giant as her… but Effie did not only have size on her side. She also had her skill, intellect, and battle experience.

The combination was truly devastating, and none of these meddling creatures could withstand her might.

It would have been even more devastating if she had a proper spear

and shield to wield, but alas, she did not. So, Effie fought with her bare hands — or rather, with her entire body except for one hand, which was being used to carry Jet — in accordance with the ancient hand-to-hand combat techniques hammered into her bones by the War Maidens of the Chalice Temple.

There were swarms of flying abominations, as well. When those descended upon her, even Jet received an opportunity to bloody her blade.

Reaching the highway, Effie advanced swiftly toward the heart of the city. As she ran, shattering the road and flattening overturned train cars and abandoned military vehicles with each step, she kept her eyes on the true threats.

To her left, on the edges of the city, the colossal shape of the Fallen Titan was toppling residential towers and feeding on the crushed corpses of countless humans.

To her right, the massive figure of the Corrupted Tyrant was consuming the remains of the government compound.

Another Titan was nearby, having already breached the ceiling of a deep underground shelter.

And finally, far ahead, on the opposite side of the city, past the shattered barrier…

A vague silhouette of the Great Devil was towering above the local outskirts, moving slowly in the eerie silence.

There were two more Gate Guardians spread throughout the ruins, as well, both already gazing at her and narrowing the distance.

And a sea of Nightmare Creatures following them.

'Everyone wants in on the party…'

Finally, she reached the drop point.

Effie sent a shockwave spreading from the spot where the edge of her foot had dug into the ground to stall her momentum, and came to an

abrupt halt.

In the next moment, her voice shook the sky with a thunderous, defiant call:

"Wolf Army! Charge!"

Chapter-1722: Slingshot Maneuver

The Wolves had been a company during the Southern Campaign, consisting of around a hundred Awakened and ten times as many mundane soldiers, as well as a platoon of MWPs and a robust stable of specialized vehicles.

The majority of the mundane members of the Wolf Company were not frontline specialists, but instead support personnel meant to facilitate and enhance the combat effectiveness of the Awakened.

However, the company had swelled in the past few years, turning into a battalion consisting of a thousand seasoned Awakened warriors and around five thousand mundane soldiers. It had also distinguished itself as one of the most elite combat units of the government forces, earning the official title of the Wolf Army.

The Wolves were, first and foremost, shock troopers. They often fought in isolation from the rest of the government forces or led the attack, dropping directly into the fiercest locations on the battlefield from the Black Beast Locket.

That was right. Effie not only had her own army, but also often carried it around. Their most common strategy was for her to assume the giantess form, cleave her way to a strategically important point, and deploy her legion in a flash of shocking violence.

It was the same today.

As Effie's roar stunned the nearest Nightmare Creatures, rows and rows of soldiers materialized on the rubble of the burning city, as if marching out from the depths of hell.

A moment later, the Awakened vanguard already unleashed a barrage

of arrows, projectile weapons, and long-range Aspect Abilities.

At the same time, heavy artillery vehicles launched concussive shells, and the lumbering MWPs came to life, the barrels of their armaments blooming with fire.

The melee fighters had already closed down their ranks, forming a loose phalanx.

…The tide of Nightmare Creatures descended upon them in a demented frenzy, only to be broken, torn apart, and pushed back.

"Show them hell!"

Effie's booming voice thundered from above.

Invigorated by the sight of their commander, the Wolves let out ferocious howls and redoubled their efforts to eviscerate the Nightmare Creatures.

'Cheeky bastards…'

She bent down and swiped her hand across the ruins of a building, grabbing a hulking abomination and using it as a projectile to crush dozens more into bloody paste.

Effie observed the battlefield from high above.

For the moment, at least, everything was going according to plan.

The Wolves had a simple, but dire objective — to secure a stronghold in the ruined city that would serve as a bulwark against the horde of Nightmare Creatures.

The seven Gates were positioned far away from the dry riverbed, so most of the abominations were amassed on the other side of the city center. The position where the Wolves had deployed was on the outer edges of the center, above the largest underground civilian shelter, and close to the reserve control station responsible for the city's automated defense systems.

They had to push the Nightmare Creatures back, establish an

impregnable fire line, bring the defense systems back online, secure the perimeter, and help funnel the surviving civilians into the shelter.

At the same time, the main force of the Western Quadrant army would advance from the rear under Kai's leadership, cleanse the western part of the city from abominations, and join the Wolf Army, effectively drawing a clear battle line straight through the city center.

That was the plan, at least.

Of course, the entire plan depended on a single presumption: that the three Saints would be able to slay, or at least hold back, the primary targets — the Gate Guardians.

Because no matter how elite and experienced the Wolves were, and no matter how numerous the Western Quadrant army was, mortal soldiers like them were simply incapable of stopping Titans, let alone facing Great abominations in battle.

Effie glanced at the towering figures of the two Titans, both drawing closer. The Corrupted Tyrant seemed to be moving in the direction of the Western Quadrant army, which had already engaged in a bloody battle on the streets of the city.

That one was Kai's problem now… sadly, it seemed that the reinforcements would be delayed.

The true horror, though, was the Great Devil, which had abandoned the outskirts and crossed the ruined walls of the city, moving unhurriedly in the direction of the Wolf Army.

The creature was still dozens of kilometers away, but its presence already felt suffocating.

'We can still win.'

In this battle, the government army had a secret weapon. That weapon was the Seneschal of the Great Clan Valor…

Saint Song of the Fallen.

Information was the lifeblood of warfare, especially so when one was

dealing with Nightmare Creatures, many of whom possessed great and terrible powers. Knowing your enemy was more often than not the difference between life and death.

And with Cassie whispering into the ears of Effie, Kai, and Jet, they would know what the enemy was capable of once the abominations got within range of the Dormant Ability.

…Of course, no one except for the three of them could know that the blind seer serving the King of Swords was secretly assisting the government.

'It's good to have friends...'

As Effie thought that, Jet suddenly spoke in a calm, cold voice:

"I think the situation calls for the slingshot maneuver."

Effie looked down, studying the tiny, beautiful woman standing on her palm. Soul Reaper's icy blue eyes were full of grim, murderous, and cold resolve.

"That one? Are you sure?"

Jet nodded, then smiled faintly.

"Yes. I'll stall the Great Devil until you and Kai are done dealing with the other Gate Guardians. Don't play with your food and come help me as soon as you can."

Effie hesitated for a moment, holding back the words of concern.

Jet was right. Dealing with two Titans was already outside the realm of possibility… if the Great Devil was allowed to enter the fray and join forces with them, everyone would be doomed.

Eventually, she simply smiled.

"Alright. Just… don't kill it before we arrive! Or, if you do and receive a weapon Memory, give it to me. You already have your Legacy Relic, while I'm sick of fighting abominations with my bare hands. Their guts get stuck between my fingers. It's disgusting…"

Jet grinned.

"Deal. Now… do it before I change my mind!"

Effie sighed, then shifted her body, slowly bringing the hand on which Jet stood back. She extended her colossal arm backward, keeping it level with her shoulder.

The slingshot maneuver was not something the two of them had learned from books on military science. It was something they invented after participating in countless battles together.

Well, calling it a "maneuver" was mostly a joke. They just liked how legitimate it sounded, which was a bit funny, considering the actual procedure.

The procedure in question, meanwhile, was rather simple.

Effie strained her muscles, exhaled, and slung her arm forward.

Her hand rotated, the open palm facing the wind. Jet would have slid off and plummeted down if not for the fact that the pressure of acceleration pressed her into the vertical wall of polished steel. A mundane human would have been crushed by such pressure, but her Transcendent body was immensely resilient. She endured, kneeling slowly and looking up.

A small hurricane was raised by the passing of the colossal arm. Effie grunted… and pushed her palm forward with all her might, launching Jet into the air like a supersonic missile.

The Soul Reaper soared into the sky, flying in the direction of the distant Great Devil with terrible speed.

As she did, her figure was suddenly surrounded by wisps of ghostly mist.

Chapter-1723: The Flight of the Wraiths

Being carried around on the palm of a militant giantess was perhaps the world's most exciting amusement ride in the world… losing only to being tossed into the sky by said giantess, or maybe riding on the back of a dragon.

Today, Jet had the opportunity to experience all three. Who would have thought that a neglected girl from the outskirts would one day be living such an exciting life?

However, she wasn't really having fun.

Nor was she living, if one wanted to be technical.

Clad in a black leather armor, Jet soared across the sky. Her raven-black hair fluttered in the wind as her figure tore apart the towering pillars of smoke, the landscape of the ruined city streaking beneath her like a blur. Her icy blue eyes were burning with murderous intent.

Perhaps it was for the best that she was moving much too fast to see the scenes of devastation clearly.

The terrible loss of life was aggravating enough, but the irreparable damage done to the crucial infrastructure would frustrate her even more. At the end of the day, the two were one and the same — cities could not function without people, while people could not survive in this poisoned world without the protection of the cities.

So, the losses humanity had suffered today were doubly great.

Even if they were to win the battle and slaughtered the Nightmare Creatures, rebuilding the city was out of the question. Not with the

focus of humanity slowly shifting toward the Dream Realm, and not in the aftermath of Antarctica.

After today, there would be one less human city on Earth. The survivors could be relocated to other population centers, and in time, the population would grow to replenish the lost lives… but the number of cities only dwindled. Too many of them had been swallowed by the Chain of Nightmares, and in the years that followed, two more fell to the Skinwalker.

This city would be the third the government lost in the last four years.

To Jet, losing a city felt like being robbed of her personal belongings. It was sad, humiliating, and deeply distasteful.

She had made a commitment to work for the government a long time ago, and as such, any defeat that the mission of the government suffered was a personal sleight.

'Those bastards…'

Jet wasn't really sure who she was referring to — the Nightmare Creatures, or the people who had pushed back against her desire to allocate more precious resources to the waking world.

It was not like she did not understand the inevitable future. The waking world... their world... was not ending yet, but its trajectory was already clear. There were already more Nightmare Gates opening each year than ever before, and the median Category of those Gates was slowly climbing toward a complete disaster.

Most importantly, the Sovereigns were in the Dream Realm. Not only because they chose to be there, but also because it was hard for them to enter the waking world... as if their very existence was denied by it. So, even if a new Supreme was born in the future, they wouldn't be able to remain here continuously and protect the cradle of humanity.

Therefore, a single Category Five Gate would spell doom to all who remained.

Which... wasn't that bad, actually. Jet wasn't a reactionary hellbent on remaining on Earth simply because that was where she had been born. In fact, she understood better than most that adaptability was humanity's greatest weapon.

Why wouldn't they resettle into a new world if their own was dying?

In fact... for every city that had been destroyed in the waking world, several were founded in the Dream Realm. The government would have to relocate their efforts there, as well.

It was just that, in her opinion, even the best of her colleagues were panicking. The trauma delivered by the Chain of Nightmare was too great, even if few people acknowledged it. And since they were panicking, they were rushing too much.

So, she was forced to clean up their messes.

Because of the rush, the government forces were too late to prevent this city's destruction.

'How ironic...'

Sometimes, she regretted that there wasn't anyone else among the people wielding power who had come from the outskirts. If there had been just one person who shared her mindset...

Ah, but wasn't it a pipe dream, for someone from the outskirts to survive the gauntlet of the Nightmare Spell? Even she could not claim to have truly survived it.

...Streaking across the sky like a deadly missile, Jet kept her gaze trained on the Great Devil and gritted her teeth.

A split second later, she activated her Transformation Ability. Her flesh turned into a ghostly mist, and a few moments later, there was a spectral wraith in the sky above the dying city.

The wraith form had many advantages in battle…

But it was also quite handy if one had been tossed like a dart by an unreasonably strong giantess, since being a ghost could prevent them

from turning into thin film splattered across several kilometers of ragged terrain upon landing.

Not that Jet would. With her special physique, she could strike the ground like a meteor and climb out of the crater in one piece, if a little battered.

Still, a soft landing was better…

This time, sadly, the landing was not going to be particularly soft. She was dropping right on top of a Great Devil, after all.

Effie's aim was immaculate.

In the last few moments before plummeting to the ground, Jet snarled coldly and turned her scythe into a khopesh.

By now, her Legacy Relic had reaped countless souls. The strongest of them had belonged to a Great Monster, and so, it was equal to a Supreme weapon of the Second Tier.

Of those countless souls, five were currently bound by the Relic, one for each of the five forms it could turn into. Jet could consume them to replenish her essence if her own reserves ran dry. Apart from that, each of the bound souls granted a mystical effect to the corresponding weapon, akin to an enchantment.

The soul dwelling in the black khopesh had belonged to a Corrupted Terror once, and a dreadful one at that. The effect granted by its soul to the sickle sword was that anyone cut by it would fall into a debilitating lethargy, losing the motivation to fight, move… and eventually even breathe.

Of course, powerful enemies could resist the insidious lethargy, somewhat, but would still be weakened a little with each strike.

As such, the khopesh was the most suitable of the mist blade's forms when dealing with an overwhelmingly powerful enemy.

And that was what Jet was dealing with now.

A Great Devil…

At that moment, a soft voice resounded in her ears:

[He is the Great Devil, Heart of Kanakht.]

[The remnant of a cursed king.]

[His power is to command the souls of the dead. He also wields the power of curses, and is a wraith himself. His body is made of sand and is all but immune to physical damage.]

[Worst of all… his soul can't be destroyed until all the souls he commands are scattered. And they are legion. I am… sorry, Jet. It's a bad match.]

Jet grinned.

[...Thank you.]

'How fitting.'

The Great Devil she was about to face was also of the undead tribe. A fellow wraith.

His powers did not exactly counter her own, but rather rendered them futile. It was, indeed, a bad match.

Or maybe the best, considering that few people except her had even a tiny chance of destroying him.

In any case, her determination to slay the abominations only grew stronger.

Because as much as the Heart of Kanakht was a bad match for her Aspect, he was a perfect match for her Legacy Relic. Absorbing his soul would not only elevate its overall power by two Tiers, but also grant one of the mist blade's forms a powerful effect that had a good chance of having synergy with her Aspect.

Now, then…

All that remained was to actually kill this Great Devil.

Or at least survive long enough for Effie and Kai to arrive.

Jet slowed down her descent and glided gracefully to the shattered ground. Her ghostly khopesh pointed forward…

There, in front of her, a towering figure was slowly walking through the burning ruins, surrounded by a haze of screaming souls.

Chapter-1724: Nightsinger

"Press forward!"

"They are flanking us!"

"Second company, fall back!"

"We need an Ascended here!"

Across the wide stretch of burning ruins, the Western Quadrant army was fighting against the disorganized horde of Nightmare Creatures. The tide of abominations continuously crashed into the phalanx of the Awakened warriors, quenching the flames that burned all around them with their fetid blood.

The mundane soldiers followed behind, supporting the Awakened and sweating inside their powered armor suits. The heavy artillery had remained in the riverbed, waiting for precise targeting data — they didn't dare to fire after the initial salvos, afraid to implicate the civilians who might have still been alive somewhere out there, among the smoke-filled streets.

However, the MWPs still pushed forward. The influence of the Nightmare Gates was messing with their electronics, but after the rich experience of dealing with it in Antarctica, the scientists of humanity had made leaps in shielding technology. So, the lumbering war machines could fully exert their overwhelming firepower, for now.

It was a heroic sight… but usually, even such a large expedition force would have been ill-prepared to face the vast horde of Nightmare Creatures, especially in the hellish conditions of urban warfare.

Nevertheless, today, the soldiers of the Western Quadrant were valiantly pushing into the depths of the city and eradicating the

Nightmare Creatures at a startling pace.

There were two reasons for that.

One reason was the shining silhouette of Saint Athena, who towered above the burning city in the distance.

The sight of her not only lifted the spirits of the soldiers, but also imbued their bodies with ferocious power. Awakened were affected more, but even the mundane fighters showcased inhuman strength, speed, and endurance. What would not have been possible on any other day was possible today.

The other reason…

"FALL!"

A deep, thunderous, chilling voice rolled across the burning ruins, crashing into the horde of abominations like a tidal wave. Countless Nightmare Creatures staggered and toppled to the ground, others pressed forward despite its domineering power — however, their movements were drowsy and weak, as if they were struggling against an overwhelming compulsion.

That was the moment when the soldiers of the Western Quadrant army advanced, cutting into the mass of dazed Nightmare Creatures like a sharp knife.

The human warriors were strengthened by the War Beast, while their enemy was weakened by the Nightsinger.

Together, the powers of the two Saints reigned on the battlefield.

Kai folded his wings and plummeted down. His great maw opened, and an eerie, melodious, otherworldly sound escaped from it, akin to a haunting song.

That song made all the other sounds of the ruined city — the roaring of flames, the groans of crumbling buildings, the clangor of steel, the howls of monstrous creatures, the thunderous drums of the cannonade — dissolve into background noise.

A moment later, the song crashed into a swarm of Nightmare Creatures led by a hulking behemoth, causing their bodies to explode into gruesome fountains of crimson liquid. It was as if they were torn apart by an invisible blast.

A Transcendent sonic attack was an insidious thing.

Rushing along the stretched battle line with tremendous speed, Kai flew through the expanding cloud of crimson haze and wasted a split second to observe the ruins.

His vision spread far and wide, piercing through soil, concrete, and alloy. There was nowhere it couldn't reach, and instantly, the whole city was perceived by him.

What he saw… was gruesome and sickening.

Countless human corpses. Countless people dying as he watched. Frightened civilians hiding in their homes or underground shelters, fear and sorrow written on their faces. Ashes, flames, and loss on a scale that the human mind could not comprehend.

And, of course, the Nightmare Creatures.

The Wolf Army was pushing abominations back in the heart of the city. Effie was moving to intercept the approaching Titans. Jet had just reached the sinister figure of the Great Devil.

And, closest of all, the Corrupted Tyrant barreling in the direction of the Western Quadrant soldiers.

'I need to kill it quick.'

The Wolves were holding up well, but that was temporary. If the reinforcements did not arrive on time, the casualties would start to mount. Worse still, Effie would have to fight against two Titans alone, and Jet would have to face the Great Devil alone.

The more time he wasted, the more people would die.

Just at that moment, like a lifeline, Cassie's calming voice resounded in his mind, whispering the secrets of his enemy.

Kai spread his wings and rushed forward.

As he flew above the carnage, his song shattered the most threatening of the abominations advancing on the Awakened phalanx, while his words made the rest stagger and lose strength.

"DESPAIR!"

"FEAR!"

"KNEEL!"

His essence was evaporating like morning dew.

There were countless winged Nightmare Creatures clamoring to rip into his flesh, as well. He tore them apart with his talons, shredded their flesh with his fangs, and broke their bones with his tail.

Leaving the Western Quadrant army behind, Kai remained alone above a sea of abominations. A hail of attacks enveloped him, coming both from the ground and from the air. He shrugged them off, evaded some of the abominations, and killed others.

And all that time…

He could see scattered survivors looking at the sky all across the city.

Some of them were numb and terrified, thinking that the midnight dragon was another dreadful abomination. Some seemed to recognize him, looking up with desperate hope.

The expressions of the latter hurt him more.

Because he knew that, for many of them… maybe most of them… there would be no salvation.

Because in this world, weakness was a sin, and they were sinners. Kai was no stranger to that sin, either.

True, the days when he considered himself weak and unworthy to be in the company of his friends were long gone. After years of leading soldiers and surviving the most terrible hells, Kai wasn't shameless

enough to proclaim that he lacked strength. No, he was strong…

But his strength was still lacking.

If he was stronger, more people would survive, and his friends would return from the battle with fewer scars.

Sadly, he was already close to the pinnacle of what a human could achieve. It was so strange… who could have thought that someone like him, a gentle and shy kid overly interested in music and fashion, would end up this way?

Still… there were ways to gain greater strength.

Opening his maw, Kai spoke:

"Be stronger!"

This time, he was speaking to himself.

"Be faster!"

His mighty, winged body was suddenly overcome by a surge of energy.

"Be sharper!"

A moment later, he sent a destructive sonic wave spreading outward in a wide cone.

Countless Nightmare Creatures were swept away by the invisible power of his song. A vast cloud of dust and debris instantly flew into the sky, which was suddenly void of suffocating smoke.

In the middle of the devastated cone, the Corrupted Tyrant staggered as the sound blast crashed into it. The dreadful abomination was not killed, of course, or even seriously wounded.

But that was not what Kai had wanted.

All he had wanted was to distract the enemy for a moment.

Knowing that his commands would not have a strong and immediate

effect on an enemy of that Class and Rank, he simply rushed to the ground and opened his maw.

In the next second, his sharp fangs bit into the Tyrant's neck.

Chapter-1725: Silent Clash

A wide street was shrouded in darkness, framed by the burning buildings and billowing smoke. The ground was littered with rubble and broken vehicles. Here and there, human bodies lay in the pools of blood, covered with dust.

A woman with raven-black hair and icy blue eyes was standing in the middle of the ruined road, holding a black sickle sword.

In front of her, a towering figure was moving slowly across the rubble, each of its steps exerting an invisible pressure on the world. The creature was surrounded by a haze of swirling sand, with only a vague silhouette of a gaunt human visible behind its veil.

A thousand screaming souls shrouded the ancient devil like a mantle.

Jet looked at him coldly.

"I hear that you are called the Heart of Kanakht… nice to meet you. I am called Soul Reaper Jet."

A dark smile appeared on her pale face.

"This is my city. So, prepare to die."

The Great Devil halted, looking down at her through the veil of sand. The whirlwind of souls surrounding it parted, revealing two gaping pools of darkness. Ghostly flames ignited in their depths, piercing her with a gaze of indescribable malice.

And hunger.

Then, a rustle of a myriad of whispers rose like a tide, enveloping her in a cold embrace.

Jet did not know the words of the ancient language the fiend spoke,

but understood them regardless with the help of the Spell:

"...broken… thing… bow, submit, surrender. Succumb…"

She felt a powerful compulsion press her into the ground, as if a thousand invisible hands were pulling her soul down.

However…

The weight of her shattered soul was too great for them to move it even by a millimeter.

Jet's smile widened.

She raised her sword and took a step forward.

"...In your dreams."

A split second later, her ghostly figure dashed toward the Devil.

Jet possessed an unusual soul. Her core was like a vast sphere of shattered crystal, countless shards pressed messily together to form a jagged sun. Her radiant essence constantly leaked through the gaps between the shards… but, in return, the more living beings she killed, the more her broken soul core grew.

And Jet had slaughtered countless beings over the years, since that was the only way for her to survive.

By now, her core was massive like a giant star, burning furiously in the cold darkness of her desolate soul. Not only that, but her dead flesh could absorb much more essence than that of someone who was truly alive, which granted her tremendous physical strength.

Strangely enough, that physical might also translated to the dire power of her wraith form.

Moving like a ghost, Jet appeared in front of the Great Devil and lashed out with her sword. All of it happened in an instant, too fast to be discerned by mundane eyes.

Of course, the eyes of the Great Devil were not at all mundane. The

figure hidden in the sand shifted, raising a hand to swat away her strike. At the same time, the sand rose like a giant palm, repeating its movements.

However, the mist blade was not swept away.

Instead, it passed through the sand and cut deeply into the ancient fiend's soul.

A moment later, a building to their left exploded into a cloud of dust, obliterated by the giant hand of sand.

And one of the myriads of souls subjugated by the Heart of Kanakht dissolved into nothingness, receiving the cut on his behalf. The abomination sustained no damage at all.

It was only affected a little by the lethargic power of the black khopesh, shrugging it off a split second later.

A thousand spears of sand shot from his towering figure, moving too fast to be dodged at such a close distance.

They passed through Jet's ghostly figure without doing any damage, as well. She jumped back, knowing that this advantage of hers would not last for too long.

And indeed, the silhouette hiding inside the sand tilted its head slightly. Then, the sand settled back onto it, forming the shape of a gaunt giant.

Instead, the haze of screaming souls flowed forward like a raging river, threatening to tear her own apart.

'Soul attack.'

Jet gritted her teeth.

This… was going to be unpleasant.

She pushed off the ground, weaving between the falling pieces of the toppled building to evade the torrent of souls. In her perception, the jagged pieces of torn alloy and shattered concrete were floating down

slowly, nearly static. The Great Devil's attack, however, was almost too fast to react.

In the next several seconds, the burning street turned into a furious battlefield. Two wraiths — one made of mist, the other of sand — clashed in eerie silence, no sound produced by their ghostly steps.

Only the sand rustled as it brushed against the rubble.

Despite the devastating power unleashed by them, not even a single particle of dust was disturbed by their battle. The pillars of smoke were not torn apart by the hurricane wind, the scorching flames were not extinguished. The ground did not quake, and the sky did not shatter.

That was because Jet was intangible, and so were her attacks. The harrowing storm of phantoms pursuing her was similarly aimed at her soul.

If their battle had been happening on the material plane, though…

The entire district might have already been flattened, turning into a smoldering ruin… like many other districts of the city already had.

'Damn it…'

Jet reeled back, pierced by excruciating pain. She had delivered a rain of blows to the ancient fiend… but what was the point? Her insidious power, which had served her splendidly across countless battlefields, was almost entirely useless against the vile power of the Heart of Kanakht.

Instead of cutting his soul, she was simply destroying the phantoms he had consumed. And they were indeed legion… there must have been millions of people living in the outskirts, where the Great Devil had been wandering before her arrival, and very few had escaped his bloodlust.

Even if less than one percent of the victims had joined the whirlpool of souls, Jet would have to land thousands of strikes to destroy them all.

Each of the attacks she failed to evade, however, dealt direct damage to her own soul. It was vast and tenacious, true, but in this war of attrition, Jet was still doomed to lose.

'Why did this bastard have to wield power over souls?'

Jet dodged a rustling torrent of haze and slashed at it with her sword, obliterating another unfortunate specter. Sadly, these specters were not actual beings, but instead parts of the Great Devil — therefore, destroying them did not replenish her essence.

Essence exhaustion was one of Jet's fears… perhaps even her only true fear. For all other Awakened, losing all of their essence simply meant enduring a period of powerlessness and not feeling well. But to her, it meant death — true death, the final and irreversible obliteration of her being.

What was worse, Jet wasn't sure that she would be able to control herself when facing this slow and excruciating dissolution. The few times she had come close to exhausting all her essence… well, she didn't really want to remember them. She had done a few shameful things.

Unsurprisingly, pushing her limits to battle a Great Devil consumed an ocean of soul essence.

Jet wasn't panicked yet, because her reserves were many times deeper than those of most other Saints. More than that, five powerful souls were bound to her mist blade — if push came to shove, she would consume them one after another, postponing the inevitable.

Still, even if she miraculously won today, the sea of soul essence she had accumulated would be all but spent. Jet would have to collect it again, drop by drop.

'Such a chore…'

Killing had become a chore a long time ago, for her. Sometimes, she dreamt of being free of her Flaw and living a peaceful life somewhere where there was no need to ever spill the blood of living beings.

Not that there was such a place anywhere in the two worlds, for

someone like her.

Those dreams were rare and silly, though. Most of the time, Jet was quite content with her life.

...Not at the moment, though.

She evaded another attack nimbly and delivered a ruthless strike to the abomination, then jumped back, phasing through a melting wall. The sand followed.

Despite the harrowing might and vile powers of the Great Devil…

She was still holding her own.

She was still fighting, full of resolve to see the fiend die.

Why wouldn't she kill him? She had killed countless bastards who thought that they were stronger than her, and were stronger than her, already.

Strength didn't decide who lived and who died.

Jet did.

'Come, come. Follow me more... hurt me more... waste time on me more...'

If there was one blessing about this excruciating fight, it was that the curse of lethargy affecting the Heart of Kanakht was slowly accumulating. Its effects were not significant yet, and yet Jet could feel that the devil was struggling a little to maintain his unceasing assault.

Ignoring the pain, Jet felt a dark grin twist her lips.

She retreated, one step at a time.

Perhaps she was not powerful enough, yet, to slay the Heart of Kanakht…

But luckily, she wasn't alone.

Just like the devil had a legion of souls to protect him, she had an army, too.

She had Effie and Kai.

So, she just had to preoccupy the bastard until they arrived.

Surrounded by smoke and flame, suffering the assault of a Great Devil, Jet smiled viciously and laughed.

Chapter-1726: Strategic Solution

The Wolves were pushing the abominations back. A team of specialists already gained access to the reserve control station of the city's automated defense systems, working on bringing them — those that had not been destroyed, at least — online. Makeshift barricades were being constructed, and there was even a trickle of civilians being guided to the shelter, already.

Effie had assisted her soldiers as best she could. She had personally eliminated the most threatening abominations in the vicinity of the Wolf Army and made sure that her soldiers were not overwhelmed by the tide of abominations. But now, to make sure that they were not annihilated, she had to sortie into the city and face the enemy on her own.

Fighting a titan was not a problem. Effie was plenty titanic herself… however, this time, there were two walking calamities approaching her soldiers.

One was a towering giant, not much smaller than she was, his body carved from obsidian stone. The giant had six hands, each holding an archaic weapon. His head had four bestial faces, one on each side, waterfalls of blood spilling from four terrible maws.

The bastard had swallowed countless humans, and was hungering for more.

The other titan was grotesque and disgusting. It was vaguely insect-like in appearance, with a bulging, fleshy hump rising dozens of meters into the sky from its back. The chitinous body was almost invisible under that mountain of flesh, and there was a noxious miasma drifting around the revolting creature like a vile haze.

What troubled Effie the most was that there were two of the gargantuan abominations. Even worse, they were approaching the

Wolf Army from different directions.

If she rushed to face one, the other would trample her soldiers, leaving none alive.

"Those fu… those wretched things!"

Usually, she would not have been miserly on the swear words, but ever since becoming a mother, Effie had been trying to clean up her speech.

With varying degrees of success.

Letting out a chilling growl, she threw a burning gaze at the obsidian giant, then turned away decisively and pushed her colossal body into an earth-shattering run.

The crawling horror was closer, and so, she had decided to deal with it first.

She had decided to do something else, as well… it was a bold new strategic solution that would not lose to the glorious genius of her patented slingshot maneuver. Of course, Effie would have to try her damnedest to make sure the thing actually worked…

Leaping over a sprawling park with one tremendous jump, she caused the ponds located on its premises to spill out of their shores with her thunderous landing, and barreled toward the titan.

The creature was enormous, but the top of its bulging hump barely reached her abdomen. Its flesh also seemed strangely porous… of course, Effie already knew why.

As she was closing in on the monstrosity, it crawled forward and straightened its segmented legs.

At the same time, a strange ripple spread over the gargantuan hump of its back. Effie scowled and held her breath — which wasn't easy because of her Flaw.

Nevertheless, it was necessary.

In the next moment, countless holes opened in the mountain of flesh, expelling long plumes of the noxious miasma. It shrouded the titan like a cloud, spreading outward to cover a vast stretch of the city.

Effie's face darkened.

There had still been survivors in that district.

…Not anymore.

'Curse you!'

But that was not all.

Following the miasma, numerous black rods were expelled from the holes in the creature's fleshy body. As they shot into the sky, the rods spread translucent wings, and unfolded segmented legs, turning into a vast swarm of monstrous dragonflies.

They seem like tiny vermin to Effie, but of course, each creature was at least a meter long, easily capable of ripping an adult man to shreds.

The undulating wall of the dragonfly swarm swirled around the crawling titan, whose hump had deflated somewhat.

'Ah, damnation…'

Effie allowed her Supreme armor to envelop her face, turning into a beautiful mask of polished steel that perfectly copied the contours of her face. A tall white plume fluttered in the wind like a river of silk threads.

'Here we go!'

She extended both her hands to the sides, lingered for a moment, and then forcefully brought them together, making her palms collide.

A thunderous clap resounded above the city, shaking the heavens.

Her clap was so forceful that it produced an actual shockwave, causing several buildings inside the cloud of miasma to explode with

dust and crumble. The cloud itself was torn apart and pushed away from the city by the hurricane wind.

Even the monstrous dragonflies were dazed, a breach appearing in the defensive wall of abominations surrounding the titan.

Leaning down, Effie plunged into that breach and enveloped the Crawling Horror's gargantuan body with her arms.

Its fleshy hump pressed tightly against her torso, smearing disgusting fluid all across the polished breastplate. Struggling against the desire to retch, she dug her fingers into the abomination's soft belly.

Effie could feel the fetid liquid trying to corrode her armor. She could also feel the creature's sharp claws scratching against her shins and leaving deep grooves in the polished metal.

It didn't matter. She could withstand the attacks of the titan for a few seconds, especially before it regained its bearings and got serious about breaching her armor.

'If there are two hostile forces attacking from different directions… the strategic move would be…'

Gritting her teeth, Effie strained every muscle in her colossal body. She rarely had a chance to push against the limits of her strength, but today was one of those days.

No, actually, she had never done something that crazy before — at least not after becoming a Saint.

Killing the titan would take too long and compromise her soldiers. She felt confident that she could kill the Crawling Horror, but not that she would slay it fast enough to prevent the Obsidian Giant from reaching the position of the Wolf Army.

So…

"Aargh!"

A muffled growl escaped from beneath her polished mask.

It felt as though her muscles would burst, and her spine would snap.

But instead, her feet plunged into the ground.

At the same time, the titan's segmented legs… rose above it.

Growling, Effie pulled upward…

And lifted the gargantuan body of the Crawling Horror into the air.

'S—so heavy...'

She didn't stop at that, though.

As her growl turned into a roar, she exhaled, and tossed the titanic being into the air.

'...the strategic move would be to move the hostile forces to the same location!'

Effie had not just tossed the revolting abomination away.

She had thrown it directly at the second titan, whose lumbering figure was towering above the ruins in the distance.

Looking at the Crawling Horror fly, its comically tiny body finally revealed from under the giant fleshy hump, its segmented legs moving in what seemed like panic... she couldn't help but frown.

'How come all my strategic solutions always end up as me tossing someone at someone else, though?'

The sight of the massive titan flying across the sky was so stunning that even the Nightmare Creatures on the ground stopped in confusion.

The human soldiers, who had developed a habit of glancing at Effie's towering figure frequently, did not miss the bizarre and baffling sight, either.

Perhaps both the abominations and the humans had a similar thought…

'I am seeing things, right?'

They weren't.

The only creature who wasn't confused was the Obsidian Giant. Because the Crawling Horror was flying directly at him.

Even though the four-faced titan was as tall as Effie, he would still be buried under the mountain of flesh if she managed to hit her target.

And she had impeccable aim.

The giant moved, bringing one of his six weapons up.

Then, it ruthlessly fell down. The stone mace struck the Crawling Horror in the air, damaging its body and slamming it into the ground. A lake of fetid blood flowed out of the wounds of the revolting abominations, drowning several streets.

The Obsidian Giant had avoided being struck by the titanic projectile.

…However, no sooner than the Crawling Horror hit the ground, the visage of a beautiful steel colossus was revealed from behind its enormous body, barreling toward the two titans at terrifying speed.

Her exquisite mask was emotionless and eerily calm.

Behind it, though, Effie's lips were twisted into a bestial snarl, and her eyes burned with murderous fury.

'Die!'

Chapter-1727: A Brawl of Titanic Proportions

The Crawling Horror was not as tall as Effie and the Obsidian Giant, but it was still a titanic creature. Therefore, its vast body had obscured the giant's view for a few moments before being struck down.

Effie used these moments to shorten the distance between her and the enemy, unseen.

By the time the enormous abomination smashed into the ground, the Obsidian Giant barely had any time to react. All he could see was a steel colossus rushing at him with great speed, her body the picture of physical excellence and perfect athletic form. The white plume of her helmet fluttered behind her like a foaming stream.

The earth quaked with each of her graceful, but thunderous strides.

Effie did not waste any time to attack.

She was unarmed, but that did not mean that she was powerless.

Leaping over the scrambling Crawling Horror, she planted her feet into the ground and grabbed the hand of the Obsidian Giant that had swatted the abomination down.

Then, leaning back, she balanced on one foot and raised her other leg, bending it at the knee. A split second later, her foot shot forward like a demolishing siege ram and delivered a devastating side-kick to the chest of the six-armed titan.

A deafening thunderclap rolled over the burning city, and an invisible shockwave tore apart the billowing smoke. The power of Effie's kick was so harrowing that a net of cracks appeared on the black obsidian

of the titan's chest. The giant himself staggered back, his movements seeming slow because of his tremendous size.

The Obsidian Giant would have been sent flying back and toppled to the ground, flattening dozens of buildings, if not for the fact that Effie was still gripping his hand.

At the same time as the dreadful mass of the titan's colossal body pushed him back, she growled and twisted his arm, pulling it in the opposite direction. Effie used the rebound from her kicks to her advantage, adding it to her strength and channeling terrifying strain into the obsidian.

There was a sound of cracking stone, and an ominous groan of something that should have been indestructible being torn.

In the next moment, the elbow joint of the Obsidian Giant exploded into a rain of jagged shards. They rained down like meteors, causing clouds of dust to rise into the air. Effie wrenched the titan's arm, tearing it from the socket entirely, and then ripping it off.

Finally free of her grasp, the six-armed abomination was tossed back…

Of course, by then, he was a five-armed abomination already.

Most importantly…

Crushing the fingers of the torn hand, Effie grasped one of the Obsidian Giant's weapons. A colossal black mace fell snugly into her grip, and a ferocious smile twisted her lips behind the mask.

Now… she wasn't unarmed anymore.

"Two titans?"

Her voice boomed above the ruins, making the sky tremble.

Effie took a step forward.

"One is made of stone, the other is disgusting. Neither is edible. What's the point of your misbegotten existence?"

With that, she lunged into the forest of obsidian weapons.

The giant had already recovered from her strike and launched a barrage of attacks, his five remaining arms moving like the spokes of a gargantuan wheel.

By then, the Crawling Horror had already come to its senses. Despite the fact that the abomination had been wounded and removed from its potent defenses — the cloud of miasma and the swarm of monstrous dragonflies — it was still a dreadful creature. Its enormous body deflated, and then, a tide of enormous tentacles shot from beneath it, aiming to wrap around Effie's legs.

'Aaah! Ew!'

Caught by surprise, Effie swayed. She managed to block three of the giant's weapons with the black mace, but two more struck her on the shoulder, sending a powerful shock through her body and producing a river of sparks as they scraped against the polished steel of her armor.

'Crap…'

The powerful tentacles of the Crawling Horror were restricting her movements, enveloping both of her legs and one arm. At the same time, the Obsidian Giant was raining blows on her from above. She managed to protect her head, but her torso was being battered, the breastplate on the verge of bending inward.

The Supreme armor still held, but it had a limit, too.

Effie was a Rank above the two vile creatures, but six Classes below them. At the end of the day, though, what mattered the most… was that she simply did not have enough limbs to contend with them both!

'You… bastards!'

Growling, she tried to rip the tentacles apart with pure strength, but the spongy flesh was too slippery and elastic. She tried to break off another arm of the Obsidian Giant with a powerful strike of her mace, but to no avail — three of his weapons blocked her strike,

while two more crashed into her helmet. All she achieved was becoming dazed.

The situation seemed dire.

'What... to do?'

Effie growled furiously and then dismissed her helmet, as if inviting the dreadful giant to smash her skull.

And indeed, an obsidian sword instantly fell from above, aiming to slice it open.

She looked up, placing her face in the path of the gargantuan blade…

And caught it with her teeth.

A dark joy ignited in Effie's eyes, and the corners of her mouth curled upward in a vicious grin.

Then, she tightened her jaw, shattering the obsidian blade.

The dreadful giant was left holding only a hilt. He moved, planning to bring his four remaining weapons down upon her, but at that moment, Effie looked at him, her teeth still bared in a grin.

A split second later, her lips moved, and she spat a jagged shard of the gargantuan sword at his face. The fragment of the obsidian blade was shot through the air with the speed of a supersonic missile and plunged into the giant's eye, utterly destroying it.

Even though the titan had seven more left, he still flinched back.

That gave Effie all the time she needed.

Stopping her struggle against the Crawling Horror, who had been trying to pull her down to the ground, she suddenly kneeled and bit into the largest tentacle, tearing it apart with her teeth.

The revolting abomination let out a terrifying screech and reeled away, a river of fetid blood spilling from the severed tentacle.

Effie spat the revolting flesh out, drowning a sea of flames below in a torrent of blood, and grimaced.

'Argh, it tastes like sh… tastes like crap!'

Using the momentary weakness of the vile titan, she used her trapped arm to grab another tentacle, pulled it to her mouth, and bit it apart, as well.

Both of her arms were free.

The Obsidian Giant was already towering above, his four remaining weapons raised to crush her head.

Effie lunged forward from her kneeling position. Her shoulder collided with the titan's abdomen, and her arms whipped around to embrace him.

Then, a bestial growl escaped from between her bloodied lips.

The armor on her back split under four devastating blows, but her Awakened Ability stopped the obsidian weapons from doing serious harm.

She mustered all of her strength, and lifted the Obsidian Giant into the air. Not too high, but just enough to rob him of any leverage.

'And away… we… go!'

Twisting her spine, Effie bent backwards and threw the titan over herself, performing a messy suplex.

Of course, she didn't slam the Obsidian Giant into the ground.

...She slammed him into the Crawling Horror.

The world shuddered, deep fissures opening in the cracked earth.

And by the time the two battered titans recovered…

A graceful winged shadow fell on them from above, followed by an eerie song that washed over their bodies like a crushing wave.

Chapter-1728: Cost of Time

'The Heart of Kanakht… the Heart of Kanakht…'

Suffering unbearable pain, Jet continued to fight the Great Devil calmly. Her mind was cold and focused, methodically calculating every move and motion of the enemy. She was unable to destroy him, but the abomination could not bring her down, either — as the two of them fought, the harrowing fury of their battle boiling in eerie silence, time continued to flow.

She was drawing the clash as much as she could, callously luring the ancient fiend to his eventual end.

Once Effie and Kai arrived…

'How do we kill him then?'

Kai would be able to weaken the Great Devil with the power of his voice. Effie would be able to deal some damage to the abominable creature with the help of the Starlight Shard… but not enough damage, considering that it was merely an Ascended Memory of the Fifth Tier.

The white cloth could shine beautifully in the darkness, as well as imbue her weapons with a rare type of elemental damage — one that wasn't that useful, apart from being able to cut intangible things.

It was a bit ironic that the only way to fight the terrible wraith had been given to her for slaying the Lord of the Dead… if Jet remembered correctly, that was the name of the Fallen Tyrant Effie had killed on the Forgotten Shore.

Something moved in her mind.

'Still, none of it is enough to kill the Heart of Kanakht.'

The most useful thing Effie would be able to do in this battle was augmenting Jet with her Ascended Ability. However, Jet… was powerless against the Great Devil. Unless she could deliver him ten thousand cuts, the fiend would not go down.

However…

As Jet moved between the raging storm of screaming souls, slashing the whirling hurricane of sand with a blade made of mist, she felt a seed of an idea… or a revelation, maybe… bloom in her mind.

'What was I thinking about?'

The Heart of Kanakht…

The name was quite peculiar.

Jet did not know what Kanakht was, but she had a strange suspicion. That suspicion came from the name of another abomination, a Corrupted Monster Effie had killed soon after entering the city, and something she had read in a history book.

…It was a strange thing, really. Jet had never been that interested in history, only learning enough to understand the modern world. However, at some point, and for a reason that she remembered only vaguely, she developed a liking for it.

Perhaps it was because of meeting someone who was very enthusiastic about ancient cultures, and being secretly displeased at not having enough knowledge to sustain a conversation. She couldn't remember who it had been exactly, though…

Maybe one of the Army Command officers back in Antarctica? Or someone at the Academy, which she often visited to enjoy the food in the instructors' cafeteria?

In any case, Jet had read about a strange custom that ancient humans had here, in the Western Quadrant, once upon a time. They prepared their dead for burial in quite a peculiar way, removing all the organs from the bodies before placing them in opulent tombs. There was even a legend about a god whose body had been cut apart, and then assembled back together, bringing him back to life.

The Heart of Kanakht, the Maw of Kanakht.

She wondered if there were also the Hand of Kanakht, the Lungs of Kanakht, the Horns of Kanakht...

Cassie had said that the Great Devil was the remnant of a cursed king.

Maybe that king had been cut into parts, just like that ancient god. And maybe those parts were kept apart, to prevent him from coming back to life like the ancient god had.

Why was Jet suddenly thinking about that?

She wasn't quite sure, yet.

The hateful giant of sand was pursuing her relentlessly. The whirlwind of souls surrounding him was just as plentiful as it had been before, as if she had not depleted it even a little. The Great Devil had slowed down, somewhat, because of the accumulated weight of unnatural lethargy, but that was all.

The Corrupted Terror whose soul was bound to the black khopesh had infected an entire city in the Eastern Quadrant with lethal sloth. The loss of life was tragic, and if Jet had not hunted the creature down in time, it would have become calamitous. But all it could do to the Heart of Kanakht was reduce his speed a bit.

'Tough bastard.'

Jet retreated, phasing through a blackened wall. The sand followed her, spilling through the cracks and broken windows before coalescing back into the shape of a gaunt giant. Another flurry of attacks descended upon her.

But wasn't it strange?

Due to her Transformation Ability, Jet could become an intangible wraith. Her body was like mist, but that mist was not mundane — it could not be scattered by the wind or dispelled by flames, for example. It could pass through solid objects or move underwater. That was because what looked like mist was not mist at all, but

simply a manifestation of her power.

Of course, Jet could return to her corporeal form at any moment.

The Heart of Kanakht, though, was tangible and intangible at the same time. The sand comprising his body never phased through the walls like she did, simply penetrating the cracks and gaps in a quite mundane way.

Why did the ancient wraith need the shell of sand, to begin with?

She barely dodged another storm of souls, each of the myriad of them like a screaming blade, and grimaced.

Her reserves of essence were running dangerously low.

Feeling a bit regretful, Jet consumed one of the souls bound to her mist blade.

That soul… belonged to a Corrupted Tyrant she had killed in Verge, in front of the gruesome wall of flesh that marked the point where the harrowing, mindless mass of the First Seeker's sprawling body began.

The silent battle continued, and she endured more excruciating pain.

Soon, she was forced to consume another soul.

That one belonged to a Corrupted Titan that had fallen to her blade under the walls of a government Citadel in the Dream Realm. The battle against the dreadful creature had cost a lot of lives, but the Citadel withstood the calamity, in the end.

Jet continued to retreat, buying time.

Some time later, she absorbed the soul in the black khopesh.

It belonged to a Corrupted Terror she had slain in South America. Jet had had to cash in a favor that Saint Naeve of the House of Night owed her to make it across the ocean in time with his help.

She was starting to falter…

The fourth soul dissolved into a torrent of essence that watered her desolate soul.

The fourth soul had belonged to one of the Saints who had completed his Third Nightmare in the wake of Antarctica. The public did not know about him, because the man had gone mad soon after Transcending. The scars dealt to his psyche by the Chain of Nightmares were too deep, and his life ended in tragedy. Of course, a much greater tragedy had been prevented by stopping him in time.

Jet let out a stifled hiss and staggered back, clutching at her chest. This time, the blow she had failed to evade was too vicious.

She consumed the fifth and final soul.

This one belonged to the Great Monster she had slain in Antarctica. She had gone there to find and kill that abominable thing, Winter Beast… but, to her dismay, it was already dead. In the absence of the powerful Titan, several dreadful Nightmare Creatures crossed the strait from East Antarctica to claim its land. Jet had recklessly fought one of them to satiate her smoldering anger.

'...Not good.'

There were no more souls to consume.

Well, there was one…

Her own.

Smiling, Jet regained her balance and raised her sword.

Her cold gaze fell on the approaching devil.

"Hey, Heart of Kanakht…"

Her voice was calm and full of dark amusement.

"I know your secret. Also… you took too long. It's too late now, bastard."

A great dragon landed on the burning building to her left, and a giant

foot encased in polished steel landed on the rubble to her right.

There would be no need to consume her own soul today.

...Her reinforcements had arrived.

Chapter-1729: Three Saints and a Devil

The three Saints faced the Great Devil, standing like a wall between him and the distant troops. For a moment, none of them moved — the abomination was studying the new enemies with its hollow eyes, while Jet and her comrades were observing his gaunt form wearily.

"How is the situation?"

Her voice sounded a little stifled because of the pain.

Kai answered after a short pause:

"The Western Quadrant army should be reaching the Wolves, by now."

Jet nodded slowly.

"Good. Then… Effie, get down. You're too big of a target."

In the next moment, the ruins were torn apart by an explosion of harrowing violence.

The Great Devil did not wait anymore. It took a step forward, and at the same time, a hurricane of sand and screaming souls rose, making countless buildings shatter and dissolve into dust. That dust was caught by the wind, joining the obliterating whirlwind.

The words of the ancient language resounded once again in the howling of the wind, rustling like a myriad of whispers:

"...all… succumb… satiate… serve…"

Jet did not listen, throwing herself into the tide of souls.

Now that Kai and Effie had joined the fight, the ancient fiend was not using only soul attacks. Instead, a flood of sand flowed from his gaunt figure, turning into a vague figure of a regal man around it. His giant hands shot toward both of them, and his mouth opened, as if trying to utter a curse.

The battle was silent no more. Instead, a deafening cacophony of sounds rang across the burning ruins, assaulting their ears like a tide.

Before the Great Devil could utter a curse, though…

A giant mace of black obsidian crashed into the mass of sand forming his head. The abomination was not harmed, but the head of the enormous sand projection was momentarily dissipated, taking some time to reform.

Instead of his voice, the voice of the great dragon resounded above the battlefield:

"Slower!"

Kai's compulsion was not strong enough to overwhelm the will of a Great Devil, at least not immediately. But, fusing with the debilitating effects of the unnatural lethargy, it bound the fiend with insidious chains.

Kai and Jet had gone through countless battles together, and using the soul-numbing blade of the black khopesh in conjunction with his voice was a true and tested tactic they used against powerful enemies.

The dragon pushed itself into the air, dodging one of the giant hands made of sand.

At the same time, the second hand reached toward the steel giantess. However, at that moment, her figure flashed blindingly with reflected light… and disappeared. Instead, a tall woman clad in polished armor appeared on the rubble, already summoning a spear and a shield.

Effie activated one of the enchantments of the Starlight Shard and shouted:

"Jet! This thing! How the hell do we kill it?!"

Jet was in the middle of brandishing her mist blade, which had turned into a war scythe — now that all souls bound to it had been consumed, there was no reason to stick to the form of the khopesh anymore.

'Good question.'

She obliterated another soul and shouted back:

"That abomination from the Forgotten Shore, the Lord of the Dead… do you remember how you killed it?"

Effie used her shield to withstand a terrible blow, putting her shoulder behind it. Despite the harrowing strength of the Great Devil, she managed to stand her ground.

"That mountain of bones?! Sure! What about it?!"

Turning into a wisp of mist, Jet evaded a torrent of screaming blades and turned back into a wraith.

"On my command… let's do the same!"

She had read the reports about the Forgotten Shore extensively, so she knew a lot about the strange Nightmare Creatures of that unexplored region of the Dream Realm. The Lord of the Dead, as the survivors of the Dark City called it, had been an abomination that lived in the catacombs, its body resembling a mountain of bones.

However, those bones were simply the outer shell of the Fallen Tyrant. Its true body was hidden deep within, and resembled a giant corpse worm.

During the final battle against the Lord of the Dead, the Sleepers led by Nephis had managed to damage the outer shell significantly, which allowed Effie to toss her shield through the heart of the bone mountain. The worm was destroyed, and the Tyrant died.

Jet wanted to do the same to the Heart of Kanakht.

The hint of a revelation she had felt after remembering the Lord of the Dead was about the nature of these two abominations.

The Fallen Tyrant had been an overgrown corpse worm hiding inside a mountain of bones to protect its frail flesh. The Great Devil, however, was a wraith… she knew better than anyone that wraiths had no fear of physical attacks.

Why, then, was the Heart of Kanakht using a shell of indestructible sand? Why did he have the need to protect himself from physical attacks, at all?

What was his secret?

It was thinking about the ancient legends of the Western Quadrant that had given Jet an answer — one she believed to be true.

Who knew that amusing herself with a bit of history would be so useful one day? If Jet ever managed to remember who it was exactly that influenced her to develop such a hobby, she should thank them.

"I'll deliver the strike! Both of you, get ready!"

If she was right, and they managed to pull the assault off, then the Great Devil would be killed. The other Gate Guardians must have already been dealt with, considering that Effie and Kai were here... so, killing the Heart of Kanakht meant winning the battle and living to fight another day.

If she was wrong...

Jet would think of something else. In any case, the damned fiend would die, the battle would be won by humans, and her soldiers would return home victorious.

Defeat was not an option.

Back then, in her First Nightmare... she had crawled out of a fresh grave, digging herself from beneath the wet soil with her bare hands.

Ever since then, nothing Jet did seemed that hard, in comparison.

So, killing this Great Devil could not be that hard, either.

Chapter-1730: Heartbreaker

The battle continued, with the three of them slowly losing ground. The Great Devil was pushing them further and further back, toward the fireline established by the Wolf Army.

Now that they were closer to the heart of the city, there were many Nightmare Creatures around. Jet would have loved to go on a rampage and cut some of them down to replenish her essence, but sadly, the ancient fiend was too powerful and overbearing. She could not allow herself even a momentary distraction if she wanted to survive.

The abominations, too, seemed to abandon their demented frenzy and scattered to avoid the rolling whirlwind of destruction that was the battle against the Heart of Kanakht.

Jet, Effie, and Kai were already battered and beaten. Both their souls and bodies had received plenty of wounds — well, in her case, not the body. Nevertheless, they were still holding up well. Pain and injuries were nothing new to them. Each possessed a rich experience of crawling out of the most harrowing of hells.

All Saints did… but these three, in particular, had experienced too many horrors to be deterred by a few scrapes, no matter how frightening the adversary was.

It was also because of their experience that they cooperated seamlessly, not only resisting the unholy powers of the Great Devil, but also slowly luring him into a trap.

The Heart of Kanakht was like a tide of devastation. He was insidious, lethal, and seemingly immortal. No matter how many times they forced the giant limbs of moving sand to collapse, the sand simply reformed into its previous shape again. No matter how many of the souls the fiend had consumed they destroyed, his wailing

legion seemed endless.

And yet…

The moment of his death was swiftly approaching. There were a few things Jet needed to achieve to make sure that her plan worked — she had to learn the limits of both the giant sand projection conjured by the Great Devil and his actual body, create an opportunity, and make use of that opportunity with flawless timing.

Finally, everything was ready. Raising her scythe, Jet yelled:

"Now!"

In the next moment, the three Saints moved like three parts of the same body.

The dragon dove down, opening his maw to release a haunting song. That song crashed into the great mass of sand and produced an earth-shattering blast, dissipating the vague form of the towering man for a moment.

Almost at the same Time, Effie tossed her shield into the breach created by the blast. The shield tore through the air like a cannonball, colliding with the gaunt figure hidden in the hurricane of sand. That figure was the actual body of the Great Devil — of course, just like the giant projection he had used to fight them, it was also made of sand.

Effie's shield could not truly destroy or even damage it. But the dreadful power contained in her throw was so vast that it shattered the torso of the fiend, turning it into a cloud of sand for a split second.

Soon, the sand would be pulled back to rebuild the body of the abomination.

But not just yet.

Jet's icy eyes glinted with dark satisfaction.

'It seems I was right...'

There, in the chest of the Great Devil, revealed when his body broke apart…

A black human heart was revealed, hovering in the air like an amalgamation of countless curses.

The Heart of Kanakht.

If Kanakht was indeed a cursed king whose body had been cut apart and scattered to prevent him from coming back to life, then wouldn't the true core of his remnant, the Great Devil, be one of those body parts?

The wraith was just a manifestation of the sinister will that still dwelled in the vile heart, and the body of sand was just a shell to protect it.

Just like the mountain of bones had protected the corpse worm.

But now…

The Heart of Kanakht was stripped of its protection.

Before the indestructible sand had a chance to coalesce back into the form of the gaunt man, Jet lunged forward with astonishing speed.

Her scythe flashed…

And cut the black heart apart.

The strike was swift and precise, almost surgical. However, a devastating shockwave thundered from the point where the mist blade pierced the heart, spreading in a wide cone and toppling a few buildings.

Jet staggered and pulled her scythe back, suddenly feeling utterly exhausted.

'Did it do it? It'd better have… otherwise, we'll be in deep trouble…'

The whirlwind slowly came to a halt.

The invisible hurricane died down.

Rivers of sand spilled to the ground, forming tall dunes.

The wails of tortured souls grew quiet, and then disappeared entirely.

Jet looked up, at the broken figure of the Great Devil's shell.

Its contours gradually blurred, and then, it crumbled like a sand castle.

The Spell whispered into her ear:

[You have slain a Great Devil, the Heart of Kanakht.]

[...You have received a Memory.]

Jet smiled and looked at the bleeding pieces of the black heart with contempt.

After a few moments, she shook her head and looked away.

"...You should have stayed in the safety of hell, fool. Why come to this dire and dangerous world?"

The battle wasn't over, still. There were still plenty of Nightmare Creatures in the city, and it would take some time for the government forces to slaughter them all. But with the most powerful Gate Guardians gone, the three Saints should be able to oversee the cleansing without too much problem.

Then, they would have to gather the survivors, treat the wounded, and transport all civilians away from the ruined city.

Work, work, work. There was no end to it. Jet could not remember the last time she had not been overworked… well, the Third Nightmare was a bit relaxing, in that regard.

Perhaps she would take such a vacation again, sometime in the future.

But first…

Jet absorbed the shattered soul of the Heart of Kanakht into her mist blade. At the same time, she took a deep breath, feeling a few soul fragments being pulled into her core. Making it a little bigger, and capable of containing a little more essence.

Her expression changed slightly.

'Wait, what is…'

There wasn't just one fragment, or even a few. A whole flood of them was suddenly pulled into her soul, too many to count.

Countless.

'...What the hell is this?!'

***

A long time later…

The battle was over.

The Nightmare Creatures had been eradicated, and although the seven Gates still remained, barriers were built around them, with soldiers keeping watch in case more abominations arrived.

The city… was beyond saving. It was damaged too much, and too many people had died. The survivors were slowly emerging from the shelters, while the soldiers were searching the ruins for those who had not been lucky enough to find a way to safety.

Jet had no heart to look at the lost faces of the civilians, so she retreated to the top of an artificial hill, observing everything from a distance.

She had replenished her essence greatly after participating in the final cleansing. So, she was feeling alright.

Kai and Effie were sitting nearby, staring at the ruins with exhausted expressions.

After a while, Effie suddenly said:

"That was a bit scary, wasn't it?"

Kai stared at her silently for a while, and then shook his head.

"Scary… you know what was scary? Watching a titan fly across the sky like a balloon. Now that… that gave me a fright!"

Despite her fatigue, Jet smiled.

"Damn. I missed that… what a pity."

Effie grinned.

"What's the problem? Next time, I'll throw a titan in your direction. You'll get the front row view!"

But then, the smile disappeared from her face. She sighed, lingered for a bit, and added wistfully:

"But, anyway. Battles like this one will only become more frequent in the future, won't they?"

Jet hesitated, then nodded simply.

"I guess."

The huntress lowered her gaze.

All three of them remained silent for a while, not knowing what to say.

Despite the fact that today's battle had ended in triumph — and a historic one at that — none of the three seemed particularly joyous.

Instead, their faces were somber, and their eyes were harsh.

Eventually, Effie broke the silence.

"Well, whatever. Now, about that Memory you received... please, tell me it's a weapon!"

Jet gave her an odd look.

"Sorry. It's not a weapon. Actually, that Memory… it's a bit strange."

Effie cursed, then leaned back in irritation and glared at the sky.

"What is it, then?"

Instead of answering, Jet simply extended a hand and summoned the Memory. Soon, a peculiar object appeared on her palm.

She raised an eyebrow, looking at it with a vexed expression, and said slowly:

"...It's an hourglass."

Chapter-1731: Slaying Blade

NQSC was still shivering in the embrace of winter, but the smell of spring was in the air. The deserted alleys of the outskirts were drowning in dirty snow and deep shadows, with no one to clean the former and no lights to dispel the latter. Many of the decrepit human hives stood empty, their tall walls forming lightless wells.

The people who used to populate the hives had long abandoned the cradle of humanity for the vast and dreadful expanse of the Dream Realm.

Sunny was leaning against a wall in one of the alleys. He was clad in the fearsome carapace of the Onyx Mantle, hiding his face behind a mask — not exactly a suitable attire for the waking world. His appearance would have probably frightened the mundane passersby, if there were any. Granted, he was standing in the shadows, so no mundane human could see him anyway.

'Feels so strange. I can barely recognize the place.'

The outskirts of today were too different from the overpopulated, suffocating slums where he had grown up. Times were changing, and NQSC was changing with them.

Sunny had believed that the world was unchanging, once upon a time. The great upheavals of history — the decimating wars, the descent of the Nightmare Spell, the legendary achievements of the First Generation — had happened long before, reshaping the ways of humanity. But by the time he was born, everything seemed lasting and stable, and so, he simply took that stability for granted.

It was a strange feeling, to realize that he was living in the very thick of history instead. Who knew that there had never been any stability, and that the reality he knew was fleeting like a mirage?

He sighed and touched his mask briefly.

The mask he wore was the Memory he had created, [Definitely Not Me]. Unlike Weaver's Mask, which resembled the ferocious face of a demon, this one was quite human, and entirely expressionless. With impenetrable darkness nestling in its eyes, the emotionless mask was quite eerie.

It was also not as comfortable as Weaver's Mask, which hurt his craftsman's pride a little.

He sighed.

'That lazy guy in Bastion is really worthless.'

Calling himself names was perhaps not very healthy, but certainly amusing.

Sunny looked down.

Many things were happening at the same time. Nephis had received the orders of the Clan Valor elders and was supposed to meet him today to relay their will. In the distant Song Domain, Rain had made her way to the roving camp of the road construction crew and was hired as a laborer. The guy in Bastion… truth be told, there was no time to be lazy.

From playing the role of the Memory Purveyor for the Fire Keepers to preparing to forge a sword for Nephis, that incarnation of his was the busiest right now. Not to mention that he had to craft a few Memories for Rain in advance of her Awakening.

The war was drawing closer, and time was running out.

…Nephis, meanwhile, was running late.

Sunny was growing bored. To dispel the boredom, he sent some essence into the Handy Bracelet and summoned the runes.

He studied them for a while, went over his Memories, and finally settled his gaze on the list of his Shadows.

Soon, the runes describing the Soul Serpent ignited in the darkness.

Shadow: Soul Serpent.

Shadow Rank: Transcendent.

Shadow Class: Terror.

Shadow Description: [When the end came, Shadow was the last of the gods to be destroyed. Many have resented him for creating death, but in the end, death embraced all.]

His gaze lingered on the description.

Sunny had read these runes for the first time a long, long time ago. Back then, it all seemed so strange and mysterious. Now, however… although he knew more about how Shadow God had created death and what it meant, the description of Soul Serpent still touched upon a great mystery.

One of the last great mysteries that Sunny still could not solve.

He knew how the war between the gods and the daemons had started, and why. But how did it end? How were the gods destroyed? What could have killed the creator of death?

For now, there was no answer.

Shaking his head a little, Sunny continued to read the runes.

Shadow Attributes: [Shadow Guide], [Spirit Guide], [Soul Weapon], [Soul Beast], [Soul Companion].

Three of the Attributes had been there before — the first enhanced Sunny's essence control when Serpent was in its tattoo form, the second allowed Serpent to become a weapon, the third allowed it to assume the form of a beast.

The [Spirit Guide] and the [Soul Companion] Attributes were new.

He concentrated on them.

Attribute: Spirit Guide.

[Spirit Guide] Attribute Description: "Soul Serpent enhances the rate at which its master can absorb elemental essence."

Of course, both the name and the description of the Attribute had been written by Sunny himself, and were the result of his own observations and consideration. Actually, he did not know if this new power of Serpent's was a separate Attribute or an evolution of the [Shadow Guide]. However, there was an important distinction between the two that had made him divide them.

It was that the [Shadow Guide] only functioned when Serpent was in the form of a tattoo, while the [Spirit Guide] did not. Whether it was the tattoo, the Soul Weapon, or the Soul Beast forms, spirit essence — at least that of shadows — seemed more active around Serpent, and nourished Sunny's soul better.

Perhaps there was something else to that Attribute, but he did not know. In any case, it was quite useful.

The [Soul Companion] Attribute's name and description, likewise, included some guessing on Sunny's part. He had assumed that it was an evolution of the [Serpentine Steel] Ability at first, but eventually decided otherwise.

Attribute: Soul Companion.

[Soul Companion] Attribute Description: "Soul Serpent can fuse with its master's Shadow Shell, granting it some of its Abilities.

Sunny felt that he had not explored the depths of this Attribute yet, but what he did know was that just like Serpent could augment his body as a tattoo, it could also enhance his Shadow Shell. The Abilities that the Shell could channel were [Soul Reaver] and [Slaying Blade].

And speaking of Abilities…

He lingered for a while, then continued to read the runes.

Shadow Abilities: [Serpentine Steel], [Soul Reaver], [Grace of

Shadows], [Formless], [Mark of Shadows], [Slaying Blade].

The first four Abilities were quite familiar to Sunny. The first allowed the Soul Weapon form of Serpent to assume the shape of any weapon, the second granted Sunny a portion of essence of those slain by its Soul Weapon or Soul Beast forms, the third allowed Sunny to bestow Serpent on someone else, and the fourth allowed Serpent to assume the forms of shadows dwelling in Sunny's soul.

The fifth and the sixth Abilities were new.

[Mark of Shadows]... was a peculiar Ability, and one Sunny knew the least about, since there was no good opportunity to experiment with it.

Ability: Mark of Shadows.

[Mark of Shadows] Ability Description: "Soul Serpent allows the Lord of Shadows to mark his vassals."

Sunny honestly did not know how it worked, exactly, so he had allowed himself a few liberties when composing that description. He had been able to find out that Serpent could… create lesser versions of itself, for lack of better word. Theoretically, Sunny could place a serpent tattoo on someone, after which a little soul snake would be born in their soul.

What was that snake capable of? Was it a new being or a manifestation of Serpent? He wasn't sure. Sunny had tried to mark his Shadows, but since they did not really have normal souls, the Ability did not work. He had also tried to mark Rain, but nothing happened.

He guessed that the soul needed to be at least Awakened to nourish and accommodate the little soul snake, and for the Mark of Shadows to take root.

And since there were no other volunteers, his experiments had ended there… for now.

All he could tell was that the [Mark of Shadows] was connected to the [Grace of Shadows], or maybe even an evolution of it. It was a way to share some benefits of being the master of Soul Serpent

without parting with it entirely.

And finally… there was the [Slaying Blade].

The most mysterious of Serpent's Abilities.

What was written in the runes had mostly come from Sunny's intuition, corroborated only slightly by careful observation. Something like that… was hard to observe.

Ability: Slaying Blade.

[Slaying Blade] Ability Description: "When in its Soul Weapon form, Soul Serpent embodies the Death aspect of Shadow God. As such, it ignores the will of greater beings."

Perhaps Sunny should have capitalized the word "will". Creatures of higher Ranks, such as the Cursed Tyrant, Condemnation, had a way of bending the world to their will…

And what was the foremost will of all living beings?

The will to survive. The will to continue existing.

Therefore, killing truly powerful beings was not simply a question of cutting them down. The killing intent of the murderer had to overpower their will to exist, as well. Without the tyrannical will to kill, the sharpest of blades would fail to cut their skin, and the most gruesome of wounds would fail to extinguish their lives.

…Unless Soul Serpent was involved.

From what Sunny could tell, when Serpent assumed its Soul Weapon form, it was as deadly to the greater beings as it was to mundane creatures. He did not have a very rich experience of slaying truly powerful abominations, so this statement was inconclusive… but, from what Sunny had seen, it was also undeniable.

He wasn't sure how it worked, exactly — maybe his killing will was enhanced, maybe the will to exist of the enemy was weakened… or even completely ignored. In any case, he was certain that the Serpent's Soul Weapon form was unexplainably deadly.

Which wasn't particularly useful to him, for now, since most of the enemies he fought did not possess that much of the Will.

And yet, Sunny felt that as his power continued to grow, the caliber of the enemies he faced would also become increasingly inconceivable… and, therefore, the [Slaying Blade] would gain more and more importance in the future. Tremendously so.

'If I live long enough to see that future.'

As he thought that, there was a sound, and he sensed movement at the periphery of his shadow sense.

Soon, a luxurious PTV awkwardly made its way through the snow and stopped some distance away from him. The passenger door opened, and a familiar figure climbed out of the vehicle, looking around with a deadpan expression.

Sunny dismissed the runes and smiled behind the mask.

Nephis had arrived.

Chapter-1732: Luxurious Ride

Nephis was wearing inconspicuous civilian clothes… well, there was a medieval flair to them, since the fashion trends had changed in that direction after the advent of the Dream Gates. In the past, only Legacies dressed that way, and even then only for special occasions. But now, it wasn't strange to see people in the affluent districts of NQSC wearing capes, waistcoats, and gambesons.

Neph's neat ensemble was tailored to fit her figure perfectly. She wore pristine white, her half-shoulder cape embroidered with golden thread — of course, it covered her shield arm, leaving the sword arm free. All in all, she looked exactly how one would imagine a princess of a great clan should look like — beautiful and breathtaking, her clothes blending modest restraint with opulence.

She looked out of place in the dirty desolation of the outskirts. Or, rather… the outskirts looked out of place when near her.

As Nephis was looking around, Sunny moved and emerged from the deep shadows, stopping at the border between darkness and light.

"Lady Nephis."

She turned to him, then took a few steps and bowed slightly.

"Lord Shadow. I am sorry for making you wait."

Then, she tilted her head a little and studied him. Her gaze briefly explored his onyx armor, then drifted to the emotionless mask.

After a short pause, Nephis asked:

"Don't you think that your attire is a bit unsuitable for the waking world?"

Sunny smiled behind the mask, then raised his chin a bit.

"Why? I think I look quite good. Don't you?"

She seemed to be startled by the question. Of course, her expression remained calm, with none of that bafflement finding its way onto her face — but after spending some time with Nephis in Bastion, Sunny was slowly relearning how to read her emotions.

Eventually, she said:

"You look… unique. I guess."

Her tone was flat.

Sunny grinned behind the mask, the darkness nestling in its eye remaining cold and inscrutable.

Honestly, he was glad to have the mask hiding his features. Recently, he had been spending a lot of time with Nephis in Bastion, and most of it was… emotionally charged and intense enough that maintaining a calm facade was somewhere between a burden and a torment. He was tired from trying to keep his feelings in check or hiding them when all else had failed.

Playing the role of an aloof Lord of Shadows was a bit of a relief.

He nodded.

"You look stunning as well, Lady Nephis."

She gave him a strange look.

Sunny wanted to chuckle, but held himself back. Remembering his previous blunder, he briefly considered adding that Ki Song's daughters could not compare. But after contemplating the matter deeply, he wisely decided not to remind Nephis about them at all.

"Shall we?"

She gestured to the luxurious PTV and walked back to the passenger door.

The interior of the vehicle was just as opulent as its exterior. The seats were upholstered with genuine Nightmare Creature leather, while natural wood was used for the fittings and fixtures. There was even a refrigerated bar with various beverages and a table with refreshments.

Sunny stared at the refrigerated bar, momentarily lost in studying its construction. Was it purely electrical or used spelltech? If so, which kind?

While he was lost in contemplation, the PTV softly drove off.

'Right. I forgot to ask where we are going, exactly.'

As if reading his mind, Nephis spoke in a calm tone:

"The elders were surprisingly open to most of your terms. Nevertheless, a few details still need to be discussed. We are going to meet with a representative of Clan Valor and reach the final agreement."

Sunny stared at her silently.

The PTV was much smaller than his dearly missed Rhino, but still more spacious than most civilian vehicles. Therefore, although they were sitting on the same seat, Nephis was regrettably a bit far.

Would it have killed her to sit closer?

He asked evenly:

"Are you not a representative of Clan Valor, Lady Nephis?"

She smiled faintly.

"I am. However, there are people who represent it more."

After that, both of them kept quiet for a while. The PTV made its way out of the outskirts and passed the great barriers of NQSC, bypassing the usual inspection procedures entirely. The Great Clans stood high above the most privileged of classes, so those associated with them enjoyed a lot of convenience.

Of course, all of it was a little ironic.

The PTV, the warm clothes Nephis wore — all of it was a masquerade that people like them willingly upheld. In truth, she did not need to wear a cape in the winter cold, because no mundane cold could bring discomfort to a Saint.

As for the vehicle… Nephis could fly, while Sunny could breach great distances with Shadow Step. More than that, both of them could run much faster than the PTV could drive. So, using one had little point.

He lingered for a few moments, then asked:

"Why are you dressed so warmly?"

She seemed to have understood his meaning and shrugged with a faint smile.

"Helps me feel human."

Sunny tilted his head.

Indeed. There was a purpose for the masquerade that went beyond simple convenience.

However, he was sitting here clad in battle armor. His demeanor and actions seemed to go against such conventions… so, what did Nephis think of him? That he wasn't human, or that he did not care to feel like one?

Sunny turned to look at the partition separating the passenger side from the driver's cabin. Even though he could not see who was driving the car, he could sense their shadow. It was a familiar one, belonging to one of the Fire Keepers.

The PTV was also decently armored and fitted with sound isolation materials, so he could probably speak freely.

After hesitating for a few moments, he asked:

"I was thinking about one of our previous conversations."

Nephis glanced at him with a hint of curiosity.

"Oh?"

Sunny stared ahead indifferently.

"You said that if one wants to kill a Sovereign, they need to become a Sovereign. Hypothetically speaking, of course. Do you really think that there is no other way?"

She seemed calm. But then again, she always did.

…Unless Effie was involved.

After a long stretch of silence, Nephis looked away and shook her head.

"It is not only a necessity, but also the only acceptable way."

Sunny did not say anything, knowing what she meant. The Sovereigns… had covered their backs, indeed.

Nephis sighed:

"There are hundreds of millions of mundane people living across the two Domains, by now. Their number is constantly increasing. There are many more Sleepers each year, as well, but not nearly as many as there should have been. Because those who enter the Dream Realm through one of the Sovereign Gates are protected from having to undergo the First Nightmare.

As long as they don't leave the borders of their Domain, the Spell won't call upon them."

Her expression darkened.

"So, what will happen if a Sovereign falls, and their Domain collapses? All those mundane people will instantly be taken by the Spell. The casualties will be harrowing, and the nascent human civilization in the Dream Realm will be decimated.

The only way to avoid such a result is for another Supreme to take

the place of the one who fell, and for a new Domain to rise from the ruins of the one that was destroyed."

She looked at Sunny somberly:

"Do you see, Lord Shadow? You asked me how I would fight a Sovereign. Killing a Sovereign is tremendously hard, but not impossible… killing one in a way that I can stomach is much more vexing. You might not harbor similar concerns, but… something tells me that you do.

So, you see — in the hypothetical situation you presented, becoming a Supreme is not only what has to be done, but also what needs to be done. I won't have it any other way, nor can I."

As she finished speaking, the PTV came to a halt.

Nephis smiled.

"But let's not discuss such dreadful matters anymore. We have arrived."

Sunny nodded and prepared to exit the vehicle. As he did, he asked with a hint of indifference:

"Who are we meeting?"

Nephis opened the door and climbed out, then said without turning back:

"Oh, didn't I mention? We are meeting my sister…"

Chapter-1733: Familiar Stranger

Sunny did not show any outward reaction — the Lord of Shadows was not someone who would be agitated by a mere mention of the Princess of War, after all.

Internally, though, he was troubled.

'Morgan…'

His relationship with Morgan of Valor was not very deep, but it was rather impactful. From their first meeting in the arena of the Dream Tournament, to his brief stint as her sparring partner, to the hellish journey across the Nightmare Desert… he couldn't say that he hated her a lot, but he also couldn't say that there was any sympathy between them.

First and foremost, Morgan represented the Great Clans in his mind. Not only their callousness, but also their dread and might. As such, he could never quite perceive her as an individual… which was, perhaps, a little unfair, but also understandable.

There had been a time when Morgan represented the pinnacle of power in his mind…

That time was long gone.

By now, Sunny was confident that he was superior to her in all but a few aspects.

Morgan did possess a diabolical talent for warfare and strategy… the cruel stratagem she had pulled off in Antarctica would have decimated the forces of Song, costing the Queen of Worms several of her most cherished daughters and the chance to claim the Tomb of Ariel — if not for the sudden arrival of the Nightmare Gates, of course.

And that was despite Mordret scheming to ruin Valor behind the scenes.

However, that was not what troubled Sunny. What troubled him was that he did not know the current Morgan at all.

The old Morgan was dangerous, but familiar, like a sharp sword. The new Morgan was a stranger. There were rumors that she had changed a lot after suffering a defeat at the hands of her brother, and the mystery surrounding her Third Nightmare did not help.

Someone cunning and unfamiliar was the exact kind of person he would have preferred to avoid.

However, there was no avoiding her now.

Sighing quietly, Sunny followed Nephis into a lavish building.

It seemed that the elders of Clan Valor were being considerate today. They had not invited him to the heavily guarded compound of the Great Clan, choosing neutral territory to conduct the meeting instead. It was just that…

The territory they had selected was an exclusive restaurant frequented by the elites of NQSC. Sunny, in his onyx armor, looked more than a little out of place when a dapper maître d' led them to a private booth on the lowest underground level of the luxurious establishment. He caught a few stares…

But not as much as Nephis.

She ignored them casually, so he followed suit and acted as if it was the restaurant that was at fault for the mismatch, not the other way around.

'Is that the way of a Legacy?'

Soon, they entered a spacious underground chamber. The interior here was worthy of being called a work of art, with tasteful decor and softly murmuring water features creating a pleasant and tranquil atmosphere.

Or rather, it would have been tranquil if not for the dangerous presence of the woman who sat behind the table, enjoying a glass of red wine.

'...Well, some things never change, I guess.'

Morgan was as striking as she had been before. She was dressed in a flawlessly tailored business suit, which was entirely black — just like the fashionable leather gloves she wore on her hands. Her raven-black hair only made her alabaster skin look paler, and there were only three flashes of vibrant color about her — her ruby cufflinks, her red lips, and her daunting vermilion eyes.

Her presence was much more powerful and cold than it had been in the past. The luxurious chamber was permeated by a sense of lethal sharpness, as if everything here was a hidden blade.

However, what drew Sunny's attention the most was something that he could not quite put into words. Morgan seemed… different, somehow. Whether it was her sharp gaze or elegant demeanor, everything about her seemed the same, but also fundamentally changed.

Perhaps she had just matured… perhaps it was something else.

In any case, Sunny found it much harder to only perceive Morgan as an extension of Clan Valor and its ruler, as opposed to a person.

'...What is up with Morgan?'

While Sunny was staring at her silently, she put down the wine glass and smiled.

Her smile was perfectly pleasant, but looked cold and infinitely sharp despite having no reason to.

"You are here, sister. Finally."

Nephis simply nodded.

"Lord Shadow, this is my older sister, Princess Morgan of Valor. Sister, this is Saint Shadow."

Hiding behind the mask, Sunny studied them without saying anything.

The two did not look like sisters. In fact, with one dressed in white, and the other in black, they looked as if someone had consciously attempted to create two exquisite beauties who were the exact opposite of each other.

Morgan looked at him with curiosity.

"Ah, the hermit Saint of Godgrave. I've heard a lot about you, Lord of Shadows. It is a pleasure to finally meet you face-to-face. Or… face-to-mask, I guess."

Her smile widened a little.

Sunny tilted his head, then walked over to the table and pulled out a chair for Nephis. Once she was seated, he sat down himself and stared at Morgan, who had been observing his actions curiously.

"The pleasure is mine, Lady Morgan. I've heard a lot about you, too."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Oh? Only good things, I hope."

Sunny kept quiet for a moment, considering what to say.

Eventually, he spoke in a cold and indifferent tone:

"That brother of yours paid me a visit. He seemed like a weakling."

The implication was clear… a person who knew Mordret's true background would undoubtedly know about the Battle of the Black Skull. Therefore, what Sunny had said meant the following:

"I fought your pathetic brother and defeated him easily. You had fought him and lost miserably. Doesn't that make you the true weakling?"

Of course, Mordret was not weak. He was the opposite. The vessel that had visited Sunny in Godgrave was merely one of countless that

the Prince of Nothing controlled, and an expendable one to boot. Which meant that it did not possess a lot of power… nevertheless, that weak body had somehow traversed the harrowing hell of the Death Zone and arrived at the Nameless Temple in one piece.

Even then, Sunny had only defeated it easily because Mordret had no knowledge of how dangerous his soul was, anymore. The legion of silent shadows dwelling in Sunny's soul took care of the rest.

Sadly, it was a trick that would only work once.

What would happen the next time Sunny and Mordret met? He wasn't sure.

No one truly knew how many bodies the Prince of Nothing controlled. His Transformation Ability was similar to that of the Soul Stealer — it allowed Mordret to split his soul and wear multiple bodies at once. It seemed to be weaker than that of the appalling Plague, though… or at least more limiting for someone who had not succumbed to Corruption and wanted to remain sane.

Otherwise, Mordret could have probably consumed all of humanity by now.

Sometimes, when Sunny walked around the crowded streets of Bastion, he looked at the faces in the crowd and felt momentarily overcome by fear, thinking that he had no way to know if… maybe… Mordret already had.

If everyone had already been turned into his marionettes, with only Sunny and a few powerful people left alive, not knowing that they were surrounded from all sides.

...It was a disturbing feeling.

Chasing the paranoia away, Sunny glanced at Morgan and waited for her reaction.

She looked at him silently for a few moments.

And then threw her head back, laughing melodiously.

"Oh, right. You met that despicable person. And roughed him up! That makes me like you, already. Please, tell me more…"

Chapter-1734: Behind Closed Doors

After the initial pleasantries, it was time for the actual negotiations. However, Sunny did not have to strain himself too much — most of the work had already been done by Nephis and Cassie, so he could just reap the rewards of their efforts.

Still, he felt a little wistful.

The situation was reminiscent of the last time he had to negotiate with Valor — back then, it was Morgan who had come to represent the Great Clan, as well. Sunny had been a mere Master and in hot water with her family because of the incident in the Night Temple, trying to avoid becoming their retainer at all costs.

'Times have changed…'

Today, he was trying to come to Valor's side, instead. However, the situation was entirely different.

His position had been hopelessly below the Great Clan back then, and therefore, there had been almost no room for negotiations. Now, Valor needed him much more than he needed them… at least on the surface. As such, he held all the leverage, and could dictate his terms freely.

Morgan sipped her wine and smiled.

"So, let me get it straight, Lord Shadow. You are willing to ally yourself with the Sword Domain in the upcoming war. You will fight on our side, aiding our armies to the best of your ability. Which, by the way, must be truly a sight to behold, considering how impressed my sister seemed after returning from Godgrave. Taken, even…"

Sitting by his side, Nephis remained perfectly impassive.

He noticed her grip on the stem of her glass tightening, though, and smiled behind the mask.

Morgan continued:

"However, you refuse to swear allegiance to my father. You also insist on retaining sole ownership of your Citadel… which, as you must know, is the most precious thing you possess, in the context of this conflict. More than that, you are only willing to make a personal deal with my sister, not a pact with Clan Valor as a whole. Am I correct?"

Sunny nodded.

"Indeed."

Morgan laughed again.

"Ah, really… if I hadn't known any better, I would have thought that you harbor impure thoughts about my little sister, Lord Shadow. You… you don't, do you?"

He answered evenly:

"Not at the moment, no."

Nephis spared him a calm glance. Before Morgan could reply, however, Sunny added in the same aloof tone:

"I hear that Clan Valor offered a marriage alliance to the House of Night, Lady Morgan, but you were refused by that young Saint. I wonder if the rumors are true."

His wording was ambiguous, leaving room for interpretation. Did he mean that Clan Valor was refused, or that Morgan herself was?

Her smile turned a little sharper, her tone sullen:

"I must say… for a famous recluse, you are very well-informed, Lord Shadow."

By now, everyone powerful enough to be informed of his existence had to be wondering about his identity. Someone as strong as the Lord of Shadows could not have appeared out of nowhere — the Legacy Clans, especially, would not believe that he was a nobody. They believed in family background and pedigree too much... and for a good reason, considering their own accomplishments.

From what Sunny knew, the most popular theory about his background was the very same that had often made his ears bleed as Mongrel — that he was tied in some scandalous way to the founder of the House of Night, Nightwalker. Some considered him an outcast from the Song Domain, while some were certain that he was the bastard son of some Legacy Clan in the Sword Domain.

Those who knew more about the truth of the world even suspected that he had been secretly raised by the mysterious third Sovereign, Asterion, perhaps hailing from the same destroyed fringe faction as him.

Sunny wanted them to speculate as much as possible. The wilder their imaginations ran, the further they would move from the truth, while simultaneously deepening the impression of him in their minds.

Morgan shook her head and smiled.

"In any case… it's fine. You don't have to swear allegiance to my father. And you can keep your Citadel. Of course, we will need you to make some concessions in return."

Sunny raised an eyebrow behind the mask.

He had expected that Morgan would acquiesce to his demands. However, he had not expected that she would do it so easily.

His refusal to accept Anvil as his king was easy to swallow. Right now, the King of Swords needed his strength more than his fealty — Sunny could maintain his independence, not becoming a part of the Sword Domain, until the war was over.

It didn't matter too much, because once the war was over and Anvil conquered the world, forcing a recalcitrant Saint to submit or be

eradicated would not present a problem.

If the war was lost, though…he would be dead, and therefore problem-free.

The Citadel, however. Sunny had thought that Valor would fight for the ownership of the Nameless Temple harder. It presented them with an enticing opportunity to spread the Sword Domain into Godgrave before the war had even started, after all.

'I guess they are really wary of me offering my services to Song instead.'

Or maybe there was something else at play. He would have to ask Cassie later.

For now, though…

Sunny stared at Morgan silently, then said without any emotion:

"That is good to hear. What concessions?"

She looked at him, interlocking her fingers and resting her chin on them.

"As my sister has informed you, the war will start with both clans establishing fortresses on the shoulders of the dead god. From there, we will venture deeper across the breastbone, slowly conquering Godgrave and searching for the Citadels in the Hollows. We will fight each other desperately in the process, of course, trying to stall the enemy."

Sunny nodded, prompting her to continue:

"Although you can keep ownership of your Citadel, you will need to make it available to the forces of Clan Valor. In short, we will establish a secondary fortress there, garrisoned by a relatively small, but elite force of Awakened and Masters. They will have to place their anchors and make use of the Gateway, of course… but no Saints, as per our agreement."

She smiled.

"I do not need to tell you how great of an advantage it would be to possess an operational base in the depths of Godgrave. Not only will we be able to hasten our exploration of it, but we will also have an opportunity to put pressure on Song from two sides, forcing them to allocate a significant force to defend their flank… unless they wish to have their supply lines cut, of course."

He considered it for a few moments, then nodded.

"Acceptable."

Morgan continued:

"Second, you will have to assist our Saints in establishing safe passages through the Hollows and share your knowledge of local topography, including the probable locations of unclaimed Citadels, the hunting territories of powerful Nightmare Creatures, and the general characteristics of the abominations dwelling in Godgrave.

Having advance knowledge of these things will be of great help to the war effort, no doubt."

Sunny tilted his head.

Venturing into the Hollows was dangerous, but unavoidable. He had expected a condition like that.

"I agree."

She smiled and picked up her wine glass, bringing it to her red lips.

"Well, and lastly, all the rest that one would expect from an ally. You will participate in general battles against the enemy, take responsibility for your stretch of the battlefront, and so on. I trust a warrior like you won't be reluctant to prove his mettle."

Sunny smiled behind the mask.

"I don't have a desire to prove anything to anyone, but sure. These terms suit me fine."

Morgan nodded and offered him her hand.

"If only everyone was so easy to persuade. Then, I will look forward to working with you in the future, Lord Shadow."

Sunny took her hand, feeling a bit… disappointed.

That was it? Wasn't it a bit anticlimactic?

They were talking about the war that would reshape the world, throw all of humanity into chaos, and potentially destroy it.

And yet, the words they spoke were so mundane.

But then again, maybe the fate of humanity had always been decided by dry conversations between very few people, held behind closed doors in opulent chambers.

He smiled.

"I am looking forward to the future, as well."

Chapter-1735: Toast to Loyalty

After Sunny and Morgan shook hands, the official part of the not-so-clandestine meeting was over. Of course, there were plenty of details left to discuss — what troops would be stationed in the Nameless Temple, how their accommodations would be organized, who would provide provisions to feed them, when the first mapping expedition would start, and a thousand more.

But all these things could be decided at a later date, and in less ostentatious company.

Morgan leaned back in her seat and raised her wine glass, smiling with satisfaction:

"This calls for a toast, if I do say so myself. The three of us will be fighting side by side soon, so… to loyal comrades. May we fare well."

Nephis took a sip of wine without saying anything, while Sunny simply stared at the table, full of regret.

He wasn't that attracted by the wine, but there was also a veritable feast in front of him, all dishes prepared by masterful chefs and both extravagantly expensive and endlessly delicious, without a doubt.

However… he was wearing a mask. So, none of these delicacies were destined to land in his mouth,

'Damn.'

Morgan looked at him with a smile.

"You aren't drinking, Lord Shadow?"

He stared at her silently for a few moments, then picked up the wine glass.

"To loyal comrades."

Sunny did not move, but on a wall behind him, his shadow picked up the shadow of the wine glass. It brought the shadow glass to its lips and leaned its head back, as if drinking. Then, it lowered its hand and returned to its previous position, copying his pose perfectly.

Morgan laughed.

"Fascinating."

Sunny smiled behind the mask.

It was indeed fascinating. The three of them were toasting to loyalty… each planning treason.

Morgan was playing nice for now, but as soon as the war was over, she would give the Lord of Shadows an ultimatum — submit or die. Sunny was promising to fight for Clan Valor, but he intended to betray them before the war reached a conclusion. Nephis was playing the role of an obedient daughter while planning to kill her adopted father, the King of Swords, and usurp his Domain.

This toast of Morgan's was quite funny.

Sunny put the glass down, contemplating the ease with which Morgan had accepted his demands. Was there really no other reason than to prevent him from siding with Song?

Claiming a Citadel in Godgrave could very well be the deciding factor of the entire war. Valor would not have given up on the Nameless Temple easily. Unless…

He turned his head and stared at Nephis, who was savoring her meal quietly.

'She wouldn't…'

Would she?

He lingered for a few moments, then asked in an indifferent tone:

"Why didn't you insist on claiming my Citadel, Lady Morgan?"

People usually tended to dance around the truth in these situations, but there was a benefit to playing the role of a reclusive, aloof, and eccentric Saint. If Sunny wanted to be direct, he could very well be as direct as he wanted.

Morgan seemed amused by his question.

She glanced at Nephis, then said in a pleasant tone:

"I can answer, but if you share what I say with anyone else, there'll be blood."

It didn't even sound like a threat, just like a fact.

Sunny did not bleed easily, so he was not impressed. He stared at Morgan, waiting, but Nephis answered instead of her:

"It is indeed exceedingly important to claim a Citadel in Godgrave. The side that manages to win the race will be able to unleash the power of its Sovereign upon the enemy first. There's no need to describe how meaningful such an event can be. But… even without the Nameless Temple, Valor possesses a vital advantage in that regard."

Sunny scowled behind the mask, not liking where it was headed.

Nephis took a sip of wine and continued calmly:

"That advantage… is me. And my Ivory Tower. The only Citadel among those conquered by humanity that can move."

He stared at her somberly.

After a few moments of cold silence, Sunny asked:

"Are you insane?"

Nephis smiled.

"I feel like I've been asked that before."

Sunny shook his head.

"You are planning to move the Ivory Tower into the skies above Godgrave? Do you have a death wish and fancy turning into ash?"

She lingered for a moment, then shrugged.

"I'll try to land it before that happens. In any case, you wanted to keep your Citadel, Lord Shadow, and that was the price. Now, you can have the Nameless Temple, while the Sword Domain has a chance of gaining a foothold in Godgrave."

Morgan chuckled.

"My little sister is correct. Needless to say, Song must not know the details of our plans. I'll trust in your discretion, Lord Shadow."

Sunny remained silent for a while, considering the implications.

'These damned fools…'

So she had agreed to this... for him?

Was it Neph's idea to bargain on his behalf, or Cassie's? Why were they being so reckless?

He was going to need to rethink a few things. The presence of the Ivory Tower in Godgrave seemed very improbable, given the region's lethal nature, so he had not seriously considered the possibility.

'Clan Song seems to be in for a very unpleasant surprise.'

Sunny contemplated silently.

He wanted to say something, but at the moment, the tranquil atmosphere of the underground chamber was suddenly broken by a grating, echoing ringing sound. The sound came from two directions, impossible to ignore.

Sunny frowned, recognizing it.

'Really? Now?'

Across the table from him, Morgan paused for a moment, then reached elegantly into the inner pocket of her suit jacket and pulled out a slick communicator. At the same time, Nephis unbuttoned her waistcoat and produced hers.

The two of them studied the screens in silence. After a few moments, Nephis showed her communicator to Sunny.

The Lord of Shadows had abandoned the waking world to dwell in the Dream Realm, so he naturally did not have one.

Sunny looked down, already knowing what he would see.

There, on the screen, an emergency notification was blinking urgently:

EMERGENCY ALERT

EMERGENCY ALERT

GATE ACTIVITY DETECTED IN YOUR PROXIMITY

ETA: ~37 minutes

EVACUATE IMMEDIATELY!

'Thirty-seven minutes…'

The Obel Scale had become much more reliable after the conclusion of the Chain of Nightmares, but it had never quite managed to return to its past stability. Thirty-seven minutes was much more time than the citizens had received back when a Gate opened near Rain's school, but still far from a stellar result.

Nephis pressed on the notification, and a map opened on the screen, denoting the impact zone. After another tap, a further message showed up:

ATTENTION ALL AWAKENED

REQUEST IMMEDIATE ACTION

Gate Category: 2 (61% probability), 3 (34% probability), HIGHER (undefined).

Strike Force ETA: 14 minutes, 44 seconds.

He let out a small sigh.

This time, at least, the government forces would arrive far in advance of the Nightmare Gate's descent. The disaster would be contained, and civilians would have plenty of time to evacuate.

Then, Sunny glanced at Morgan with suspicion.

…Had she known that this would happen?

Logically, she could not have. But then again, all of it was a little too convenient. Choosing such a public location for their meeting was premeditated, without a doubt — Morgan clearly wanted to send Song a message that the Lord of Shadows was taking Valor's side.

Was there a better way to announce it than to be seen clearing a Gate side by side with him?

Not to mention that it was a good opportunity to gauge his strength.

Sensing his gaze, Morgan looked up from the screen and smiled helplessly.

"Ah, how bothersome. Do not worry, Lord Shadow… we can stay here until the turmoil ends. The restaurant is outfitted with top-notch defenses, and employs Awakened guards."

She leaned back and then added in a relaxed tone:

"Or, you know… we can respond to the summons and help the government contain the Gate. You are my guest today, so you decide."

Sunny stared at her coldly, feeling like he was being played.

Before he could answer, though, Nephis wiped her lips with a napkin and stood up.

She hid her communicator, buttoned up her waistcoat, and glanced at Morgan calmly.

"I'll go."

Morgan laughed.

"My little sister is an example to us all, as always. Well, in that case, I'll go too."

Sunny sighed and threw a regretful look at all the food on the table.

Should he secretly leave a shadow behind and make it steal all these delicacies once they leave?

Abandoning that thought, he pushed back his chair and stood up, as well.

His voice remained indifferent:

"...Then let's go."

Chapter-1736: Make it Four

The three of them left the opulent chamber and headed to the surface level of the restaurant, intending to leave. Morgan walked in the front, while Sunny and Nephis followed a step behind.

As they approached the elevators, they could see the staff of the restaurant leading the guests to a heavily armored shelter. This place was usually visited by the elites of NQSC, after all — all of them were prominent citizens. Their safety had to be guaranteed for an exclusive establishment to fair well.

Many of the elites recognized Morgan and Nephis. Sunny could tell that all of them were relieved at the sight — especially when they saw Neph. Her reputation was not only that of a brilliant warrior, but also that of a selfless champion. Morgan could have decided to ignore a descending Gate, but Changing Star would never.

"Lady Nephis! Lady Morgan! Are you heading for the Gate?"

Morgan slowed down a little and bowed slightly.

"Indeed. Have no worry, ladies and gentlemen. We will contain it in no time, and you'll be able to finish your meals in peace. Please excuse us."

Nephis bowed silently and continued on her way, surrounded by excited whispers.

As they entered the lift, Morgan sighed and looked at her sternly:

"Really, sister. Couldn't you have said something? That old man manages the hydroponic complex that supplies half of the grain to Bastion. The young couple is the daughter and son-in-law of the Chief Administrator of the central district of NQSC. The rest hold important positions, as well. Leaving a good impression would not hurt anyone,

would it?"

Nephis glanced at her emotionlessly.

"...Actions speak louder than words."

Morgan laughed.

"What does the action of ignoring them say, then?"

However, she didn't press the issue. She wasn't someone who cared for ingratiating herself to people, either — in fact, it was the people who were desperate to get in her good graces.

Not only was Morgan a Saint, she was also the princess of the Sword Domain. Her importance would trample all of these elites combined.

Soon, they emerged from the restaurant. The beautiful building had undergone a transformation, plates of heavy armor descending to cover the doors and the windows. Sunny would have expected the armor to be made from reinforced alloy, but to his surprise, it was actually made from Dream Realm materials.

'Truly an exclusive establishment.'

A familiar Fire Keeper, Sid, hastily opened the door of the PTV and invited them inside. The drive was a short one, only taking a few minutes — most of the vehicles on the road were moving away from the impact zone, but they were driving to its very heart.

In the end, they arrived almost at the same time as the first squads of the government forces.

The Gate manifested in a park. It had not opened yet, of course, but there was already a sinister atmosphere in the air. There was a strange haze above the frozen pond, a precursor to the appalling fissure that would split reality apart soon.

Armored vehicles had torn apart the white blanket of snow, and soldiers were hastily raising fortifications. The government Awakened were silently preparing for battle, while a small group of Awakened volunteers were huddled together, discussing their Aspects.

The arrival of the luxurious PTV caused quite a stir. And when Morgan and Nephis emerged from it, everyone simply froze, staring at them with wide eyes.

"That's… that's… the Sword Sisters…"

"Goddess Morgan! G—goddess Nephis!"

"Quiet, you fool! They are Saints! They can hear you!"

"Who is that with them?"

"Is he an Echo?"

"I don't know… but that guy is super creepy…"

Sunny stared at the soldiers menacingly, unhappy with the way they ogled Nephis.

Morgan and Nephis, meanwhile, calmly walked to the person in charge.

It was a Master wearing a military coat on top of light Memory armor. He, too, was both elated and taken aback at the sight of them.

"Uh… Lady Morgan. Lady Nephis. It is an honor to meet you."

Morgan nodded, flicking a snowflake off the lapel of her stylish black suit jacket.

"We were nearby. So, we decided to help."

The Master seemed relieved.

"That… that is great. With two Saints, we can…"

Standing behind them, Sunny shifted slightly and looked up.

A wide smile appeared on his face, hidden by the emotionless mask.

'Three Saints. But, actually… make it four.'

No sooner than he thought it, there was a rustle, and a dashing figure

descended from the grey sky.

The soldiers, who had been stunned by the arrival of two sublime beauties, now seemed dumbstruck.

"N—Nightsinger…"

"He's so… so…"

"Oh. My gods!"

"I am not dreaming, am I?"

Sunny's smile trembled.

'That bastard doesn't change!'

Indeed, the man who had descended from the sky was none other than Nightingale, Saint Kai… the Dragonslayer.

Wearing beautiful armor made from ivory scales and burnished bronze, with luscious auburn hair and mesmerizing green eyes, he was just as tantalizing as ever. No, even worse… Kai had always been unreasonably attractive, but now that he was a Saint, his beauty was almost blinding.

It was to the point where Sunny felt a strange impulse to look away, but was also incapable of doing so.

There were only two Transcendents out there who could challenge Kai in the looks department — one of them was Cassie, the other was Beastmaster.

…Sunny could not compete.

Not that he needed to!

'I have my charms, as well…'

Really, he looked quite good. It was just that anyone would feel that comparing themselves to Kai was simply unfair.

It was a cruel injustice!

While Sunny was staring at him sullenly, Kai landed softly in front of Morgan and bowed. Then, he looked up with a refreshing smile.

"Lady Nephis. Lady Morgan. Are you here to help?"

Morgan remained silent a split second longer than usual, then reciprocated his smile.

"Ah, yes. As I was saying, we were nearby."

Kai's smile widened a little.

"Please accept my deepest gratitude. I've just returned from the Western Quadrant and happened to be in NQSC by chance. Truly, what a fortunate turn of events! This Gate won't disturb the citizens with such distinguished warriors protecting them."

Nephis looked at him and asked with a faint smile:

"How is Effie doing?"

He chuckled.

"Everything is well. The battle was a tough one, this time, but we pulled through. Little Ling already has a new favorite bedtime story."

With that, he turned to Sunny, lingered for a moment, and asked politely:

"It is a pleasure to meet you, sir. I am Saint Kai, with the government forces. And you are?"

Sunny hesitated, considering how to answer.

Eventually, he decided to do some mischief.

Staring at Kai emotionlessly, he said in a calm tone:

"You can call me Shadow. I am your best friend."

Kai blinked a couple of times.

Slowly, a funny expression appeared on his face.

His thought process was rather clear…

'My best friend? I clearly have never met this person before.'

'But he doesn't seem to be lying?'

'No, but it can't be true! I would have remembered having a best friend.'

'So if he's not lying, but also not telling the truth…'

'I see! This man is insane! He sincerely believes his lie!'

'Wait. Oh, gods! He's not a sasaeng, is he?!'

Kai's magnetic smile dimmed a little.

At that moment, Nephis gave Sunny a strange look and intervened.

"This is Saint Shadow. He is… a bit eccentric. He is also here to help."

Kai hesitated for a bit, then nodded dubiously.

"I see. Thank you for volunteering, Lord Shadow."

With that, he turned to the Master in charge of the government forces.

"Scrap the battle plan and move your people back. We will take care of the Gate — with some luck, you guys won't even have to put down the stragglers."

The Master nodded gratefully.

"Yes, Saint Kai!"

By then, the wind was stirring, and a strange dimness was spreading over the park. The air above the frozen pond was trembling more intensely.

The descent of the Nightmare Gate was not far.

Kai turned to Morgan and Nephis, asking politely:

"How do you want to handle this?"

Morgan lingered for a few moments, then gave Sunny a teasing look.

Her red lips twisted into a smile, and she said pleasantly:

"Lord Shadow, would you like to do the honors? My sister was so eloquent when describing your prowess. I must admit, I am a little jealous at not having had the pleasure to witness it myself."

Sunny stared at her coldly.

'...Want to measure my strength, do you?'

He remained silent for a while, then shrugged.

"Sure. Stay here, then. I'll handle it."

'Well, then you'll have to be disappointed!'

As the reality split, torn apart by a dark fissure, a graceful figure of a stone knight rose from his shadow, two ruby eyes igniting with cold crimson flames.

Sunny looked up at Saint, pointed at the Gate, and said evenly:

"Go deal with it."

His taciturn knight tilted her head slightly, then turned around and looked at the Gate.

Although she did not say anything, somehow, it felt as if her aloof gaze was full of disdain.

Summoning her black blade and a round shield, she gave its rim two lukewarm blows and headed toward the frozen pond with graceful, unhurried steps.

Morgan, Nephis, and Kai were left staring at her in bewilderment.

Sunny crossed his arms and said in an even, indifferent tone:

"That should do it. Everyone... relax and enjoy the show."

Chapter-1737: A Walk in the Park

When the appalling darkness of the Nightmare Gate split reality apart, sunlight dimmed and turned strangely bleak, making the world look desaturated. A gust of cold wind rushed across the snowy park, as if the sky itself was being sucked into the black fissure. A moment later, an eerie shockwave rolled over the soldiers, making them stagger.

Neph's white cape fluttered in the wind, but none of the four Saints moved.

For a moment, the only being moving in the impact zone was Saint. She walked steadily toward the Gate, her graceful figure emanating the feeling of a cold, indifferent inevitability.

Kai stared at her back for a second, then cleared his throat.

"Your Echo seems really impressive, Lord Shadow. Stylish, too… such a chic and understated armor design… monochromatic in theme, yet rich and expressive instead of being dull. What a beautiful use of form and texture variation to counterbalance the lack of a dynamic palette… splendid, really! Wait... where was I?"

He paused for a moment, and then added with an embarrassed smile:

"Right. What I meant to say was… your Echo can stall the abominations and break their momentum. We will follow behind and engage the Nightmare Creatures when they get past her."

Sunny glanced at him and tilted his head a little.

"...Get past her?"

Kai hesitated a little, unsure of what to say.

"Yes... there is a high enough possibility that this Gate will reach Category Three, after all. Even if she is a Transcendent Echo... it might be a bit tough."

Sunny smiled behind the mask.

"Just watch."

He turned away and stared at Saint. Kai, Nephis, and Morgan had no choice but to follow his example.

In fact, Sunny felt a bit awkward, just standing there and doing nothing while Saint did all the work…

He would have summoned the Shadow Chair and sat down, but sadly, that chair usually stood behind the reception desk of the Brilliant Emporium. Anyone who had visited the dining hall could recognize it at a glance.

'Standing awkwardly it is, I guess.'

Out there in front of them, the first of the Nightmare Creatures appeared from the dark fissure of the Nightmare Gate. It was a hulking beast with a bulging body, terrifying muscles moving smoothly under its tough grey hide. The abomination's hind legs seemed underdeveloped, but its front limbs were grotesquely large, resembling craggy tree trunks.

Two vicious tusks curved upward from its jaw, as long as pikes.

The beast let out a deafening bellow and charged forward, the ground shaking from its heavy footsteps.

Saint did not slow down. She simply lowered her shield, meeting the abomination's charge head-on, midstride.

In the next moment…

The dreadful tusks hit the onyx shield and shattered. Next was the creature's head. Its skull burst like a rotten pumpkin, splattering

across the snow in a crimson wave. The massive abomination collided with the shield and was crushed into pulp against its surface, only to be tossed aside by a flick of the wrist a moment later, falling to the ground in a lifeless, bloody heap.

It was as though it had used Saint to commit suicide.

Standing by Sunny's side, Kai blinked.

Nephis, who had seen the taciturn Shadow before, seemed unsurprised. Morgan was too shrewd to show a reaction, but her gaze had turned a little sharper.

Sunny smiled.

In front of the Gate, more Nightmare Creatures were born from the appalling darkness. A tide of them, each seemingly powerful enough to rip an armored vehicle to shreds.

Saint finally seemed to pay them attention.

Gripping her sword, she lunged forward and turned into a dark blur. A cloud of snow, ice, and torn ground exploded into the air from where her foot had pushed against the ground.

By the time the soldiers had registered that, she was already among the abominations.

To them, it looked as if a hurricane of darkness descended upon the tide of Nightmare Creatures, tearing flesh from bones and swiftly turning crimson from the haze of blood. A cacophony of howls filled the air, and severed bodies rained down on the snow, which was swiftly painted red and melted under the heat of harrowing violence.

Of course, the four Transcendents could follow the battle clearly.

To them, it looked quite different.

Instead of the hurricane of blurry darkness, they saw Saint wielding her sword with chilling grace, reaping a harvest of lives with each movement. Her swordsmanship was solid and precise, each step measured, each slash flawlessly efficient and inescapably lethal.

The black sword rose and fell, severing abominations in half. The onyx shield swung, crushing their skulls and breaking their bodies. The sword was like the ruthless blade of a guillotine, while the shield was like an impenetrable wall of polished black stone.

Saint was so tyrannical that even when surrounded by monsters and demons, she seemed like the true hellspawn. Despite the gruesome massacre she was perpetrating, her dark armor remained spotlessly clean, with not even a single drop of fetid blood landing on its onyx surface.

Her dreadfully beautiful battle art was like an elegant dance, allowing her to weave between the falling bodies without becoming stained by their filth.

The tide of abominations collided with her and came to a shuddering halt, dissolving into a haze of blood right in front of the stunned soldiers.

Morgan took a deep breath.

"Lord Shadow, this Echo of yours… is quite fearsome."

Kai nodded slowly.

"Yes, indeed. You must cherish her a lot."

Sunny gave them a short glance, then turned back to face the Nightmare Gate.

"...Actually, she is the second weakest among my servants."

Which was technically true — after all, among his Shadows, only the Marvelous Mimic was lower than Saint in Rank and Class. Of course, Sunny would not bet money on any of his other Shadows surviving in a battle against the Onyx Saint.

He wasn't even sure that he would survive something like that, if push came to shove.

Kai stared at him with wide eyes, prompting Sunny to smile behind the mask.

"The... second weakest?"

He nodded.

"I killed the original as a Sleeper, after all. It was a long time ago."

The beautiful archer paled.

"S—sleeper? You killed that… as a Sleeper?"

Sunny remained silent for a moment, then shrugged.

"Sure. Come to think of it, among the Nightmare Creatures I killed as a Sleeper, she was one of the weakest as well."

Saint had been a mere Awakened Monster back then, and Sunny had killed plenty of abominations of higher Rank and Class on the Forgotten Shore… including a Great Devil. So, if one only took pure strength into account, Saint had indeed been in the lower tier of the creatures slain by him there.

Kai opened his mouth, then closed it, then opened it again.

Finally, not knowing what to say, he turned away stiffly.

Sunny chuckled internally.

'Ah! I missed teasing this guy!'

In front of the Nightmare Gate, Saint had mercilessly obliterated the first wave of the abominations.

...The same fate awaited the second wave, and the third. Not a single Nightmare Creature managed to escape her blade.

Observing the scene of chilling carnage, Sunny couldn't help but feel a little wistful.

He remembered vividly the first time he had encountered a Nightmare Gate. How desperate he had fought, and how impossible the task of stemming the tide of abominations had seemed. In the end, he would have failed if not for Jet's timely arrival.

Yet, this time… the Category of the Gate was one Rank above the one he had defended against as Mongrel. However, Sunny did not even have to move a finger. Just one of his Shadows was enough to contain the threat, and he did not even have to bestow the full augmentation of all his shadows upon her.

So much time had passed, and so many things had changed. Some for the better, some for the worst.

Sunny secretly glanced at Nephis and Kai as the Gate Guardian finally emerged from the fissure.

The creature looked like a mountain of grey flesh, its towering body brimming with bulging muscles, sharp tusks, bloodied spikes, and ghastly bone armor. It bellowed furiously, making the entire park quake.

A Corrupted Tyrant, from the looks of it.

Standing on a pile of corpses, Saint glanced at it and finally deigned it necessary to summon the elemental darkness from her heart. A dark aura enveloped her black sword, and a cold chill ran down Sunny's spine.

Her ruby eyes flashed with furious crimson light.

The Tyrant surged forward, and at the same time, the black blade slashed the world apart.

'...Now who's showing off?'

A thin line slowly revealed itself on the towering abomination's powerful body, cleanly dividing it into two vertical halves. Then, it slowly oozed blood.

The Tyrant stumbled, then slowly crumbled to the ground, its body falling apart into two bloody chunks.

The Handy Bracelet spoke into Sunny's ear:

[You have slain a Corrupted Tyrant.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

These were the only fragments Sunny had received from this fight.

Looking at the carcasses of the massacred Nightmare Creatures, which piled high in the suddenly silent park, he sighed.

'What a waste.'

Saint stared at the bleeding chunks of the dead tyrant with indifference, then turned and glanced at Sunny.

Receiving his nod, she took a step back and dissolved into shadows.

A few moments later, creepy and crazy silently returned to him and fused with naughty, who had been pretending to be a normal shadow all along, resting leisurely on the ground beneath his feet.

Sunny looked at Morgan and remained silent for a moment.

"My apologies. I'll try to give you an opportunity to witness my prowess some other time."

Chapter-1738: Crumbling Dam

The Gate crisis had come to an end just like that, leaving the government soldiers standing there in stunned silence.

In the end, none of them had to do anything to contain the Nightmare Creatures. The arriving reinforcements were shocked to see piles of corpses littering the ground — they had been expecting to dive into a dire battle, but ended up witnessing the aftermath of a chilling slaughter instead.

Of course, it was not as if they had nothing to do.

The park had been ravaged by the devastating battle, and the ugly fissure of the Nightmare Gate still shimmered in the air. Sunny looked at it with regret — there were not that many parks in NQSC, and this one would be unusable for the foreseeable future.

Unless a cohort of Masters challenged and conquered the Nightmare Seed, this place would never be safe for humans.

The initial tide of abominations had been obliterated, and the Gate Guardian fell. However, new Nightmare Creatures could emerge from the fissure at any moment.

The government forces would have to build a containment zone around the Gate, complete with powerful explosive charges and a fortified perimeter. Mundane soldiers and Awakened warriors would have to stand watch inside the zone at all times, participating in sporadic skirmishes every time an abomination wandered into the waking world.

Kai was looking at the Gate, as well, his expression grim.

In the decades since the descent of the Nightmare Spell, many of such containment zones had littered the areas populated by humans. There

were many here in NQSC, too — and the more of them appeared, the thinner the government forces had to be spread.

The situation had only worsened after the Chain of Nightmares. It was comparatively easy to find cohorts of Awakened willing to challenge Second Nightmares and hopefully conquer it, closing the Gate. The one near Rain's school had long disappeared, for example.

But it was much harder to close a Category Three Gate, since only Masters could hope to survive the Third Nightmare. Even then, most did not.

And although the number of Masters humanity possessed had increased tenfold, and continued to grow with each year, the number of Gates of higher Categories was increasing faster.

Kai sighed and shook his head. His voice sounded a bit tired when he mumbled quietly:

"No rest for the wicked…"

Morgan, who had been conversing with the Master in charge of the government soldiers, glanced at him with curiosity:

"Oh? Will you lead the charge personally, Lord Kai?"

He smiled weakly, causing a few of the mundane soldiers to sway, and shook his head.

"I'm not sure. I'll have to discuss it with my superiors first."

She nodded in understanding.

"Well, for what it's worth. Clan Valor is willing to offer help, this time. After all, I didn't get to do anything despite showing up so confidently. My hands are itching for a fight."

Sunny was listening to them in confusion.

He was certain that none of it showed in his body language, and yet Nephis decided to explain.

"The government is trying to adapt to the new environment. Since there are too many Gates that can't be closed, they are constantly searching for a way to lessen the strain of guarding them all. The most effective method is to allow a Saint to follow the Call to the Nightmare Seed and cleanse the territory surrounding it from all abominations.

That way, they won't be wandering into the waking world, at least for a while."

She studied the dark fissure of the Gate and added:

"I have participated in plenty of these cleansing operations myself. Many of the Legacy Saints have followed my example, as well, offering their services… especially those of the new generation, who hold me in high regard. Their battle experience is comparatively poor, so they see it as an opportunity to sharpen themselves.

As long as the vicinity of the Nightmare Seeds is cleansed at set intervals, the strain on the government resources is lessened drastically."

Sunny stared at her for a while, then said in a cold tone:

"Sounds like trying to plug holes in a crumbling dam."

Nephis smiled faintly.

"Indeed. However, it also teaches the people who are sealing the holes how to swim."

Then, her expression darkened a little.

"But I agree with your sentiment. It is merely a stopgap measure."

Kai and Morgan walked over, catching the tail end of their conversation.

The charming archer smiled.

"As long as there are brave people who are willing to rise to the occasion, everything is not lost. We will continue to keep this world

safe... or at least as safe as possible. Like you did today, Lord Shadow. Please, accept my sincere gratitude."

Sunny stared at him for a while.

Then, he nodded and said evenly:

"Fine. I accept it."

Kai gave him a dubious look. Not knowing what to say, he turned to Nephis, intending to thank her as well.

'Should I do it, or not?'

Sunny hesitated for a moment, but couldn't help himself.

So, he added in a tone of indifference:

"Don't expect my help next time, though. I have a bad history with Nightmare Gates… the last time I happened to be near one, I ended up in a custody dispute with a Cursed Terror."

Encountering the Category Four Gates in Antarctica had led him to the Third Nightmare, after all, where he ended up meeting a certain vile bird.

Kai forgot what he was going to say to Nephis and stared at him numbly.

"A… a… a custody dispute?"

Sunny gave him a nonchalant nod.

"Yes. The Cursed Terror wanted its spawn back. Thieving scumbag."

The charming archer took a deep breath, looked at the sky, and then forced out a few words, his tone stifled:

"Ah. I… I see."

He struggled to say something else, but Sunny interrupted him:

"By the way. Nightingale… it's a bird, isn't it? Huh. I dislike birds."

Kai froze, looking at him with a troubled expression.

Sunny stared at him for a bit, then leaned forward, raised a hand... and patted him on the shoulder.

"It's alright. I'll make an exception for you, Saint Nightingale. Since we're friends."

With that, he turned to Nephis and said without any emotion:

"I am ready to leave."

She was staring at him strangely.

Morgan was, as well.

Sunny tilted his head a little.

"...What?"

The two of them glanced at each other, then shook their heads at the same time.

"No, no. It's just that… you have a unique way with words, Lord Shadow."

"Nothing."

The former was said by Morgan, while the latter was said by Nephis.

He smiled behind the mask.

"Curious. I've been described as unique twice today. I am starting to suspect… that it is not a compliment."

Morgan smiled pleasantly and said in an exceedingly polite tone:

"...It isn't."

Shaking her head, she bowed to Kai lightly and turned away, heading for the PTV that had driven them here.

Sunny followed, giving Nephis a chance to say a proper goodbye to

the charming archer. She caught up with them soon, wearing a complicated expression.

Or rather, her expression was as stoic as always. However, Sunny could feel a bit of tension hiding in the depths of her grey eyes.

They passed the military vehicles and approached the PTV. The Fire Keeper who had driven it, Sid, was already back — she had joined the volunteer Awakened before the Gate opened, intending to lead them into the battle.

Of course, their participation had not been necessary, in the end.

Sid was on her way to open the passenger door when Nephis stopped suddenly, looking at the PTV with a frown.

Sensing her unease, Morgan and Sunny stopped, too.

Morgan glanced at Nephis, raised an eyebrow, and asked with a hint of amusement in her voice:

"What's the matter?"

Neph remained silent for a few moments, studying the luxurious vehicle somberly.

Then, she slowly turned away and looked at Sunny.

"Lord Shadow… I apologize."

He blinked a couple of times.

Was she apologizing for having dragged him to an opening Gates? No, Nephis saw the fight against the Nightmare Spell as a sacred duty of all Awakened. She would not have apologized for something like that.

What then?

Hiding his confusion, Sunny asked in a cold tone:

"What for?"

Her expression remained calm when she answered:

"It seems that I am about to be assassinated. Sorry for the inconvenience."

'...What?'

Before Sunny could react, Sid unlocked the passenger door and pulled on the handle.

In the next moment, the PTV disintegrated in a blinding flash, and the roar of a deafening explosion thundered above the snowy park.

Chapter-1739: Assassination

The PTV exploded.

No, really…

Sunny was stunned.

'Who tries to assassinate a Saint with explosives?'

Were these people mentally challenged?

The notion was so silly that, for a moment, his mind refused to register it.

Everything had happened too fast for the government soldiers to react. The vehicle dissolved into a blinding flash, and a furious onslaught of flame was unleashed upon the world.

A devastating shockwave also rolled out, spreading like an invisible ripple of crushing force.

…But, of course, the Saints were faster.

Kai was too far away to do anything, but Sunny, Morgan, and Nephis were not.

Granted, there was not a lot that they could do in such a short amount of time.

Nephis seemed to have controlled the flames to flow around Sid, her driver. The Fire Keeper was spared from being burned, but received the full brunt of the shockwave, staggering back as her dirty-blonde hair fluttered in the wind. Of course, as a Master, she would not be hurt badly, but a pained grimace still appeared on her face.

Morgan, meanwhile, raised one leather-clad hand… and cut the

explosion apart.

Sunny was pretty sure that he was not seeing things. As her hand slashed forward, both the flame and the shockwave parted in front of her, as if cut by an unseen blade. The explosion rolled past the Princess of War, leaving her entirely unscathed. Not a single blemish appeared on her stylish black suit.

As for Sunny himself…

He didn't do anything. That short moment was enough for him to determine that the explosion was utterly mundane, so there was no need to act. Sunny simply allowed the flame to swallow him, and for the shockwave to batter him.

A second later, his onyx figure was revealed from the expanding fire, standing exactly where he had stood before. He didn't even flinch under the assault of the violent forces.

But behind him, many of the government soldiers were thrown against the hulls of the armored vehicles, the vehicles themselves swaying heavily or even overturning. Screams and stunned yells filled the air.

There were many wounded. Luckily, the PTV had stood apart from the military vehicles, so no one seemed to have died.

But still.

The explosion seemed to have hurt everyone except for the person it was supposed to, presumably, kill.

Before the shockwave even had time to dissipate, Morgan, Nephis, and Sunny looked at each other, all sharing the same thought.

'It's a diversion.'

The explosion was simply meant to distract them when the actual attack arrived.

But what…

Suddenly feeling a sense of urgency, Sunny sent his shadow sense outward, spreading it across a vast area. There were countless shadows on the crowded streets of NQSC, so his mind was almost overloaded by the density of information flowing into it. Luckily, he had long learned how to filter out the useless noise, concentrating solely on potential threats.

There did not seem to be anything dangerous close to them… but it took some time for his senses to stretch to their absolute limit.

'There!'

Sunny had sensed a swift shadow barreling towards them, but there was already no time to react.

Before any of them could move, a strange arrow that had only become visible a split second before hitting its target revealed itself in the air, piercing through the cloud of flame caused by the explosion.

It was enormous in size, almost two meters long, and resembled a projectile fit for a siege engine much more than it did an arrow meant to be shot from a bow. If not for the fletching on the back side of the shaft, Sunny would have mistaken it for a heavy javelin.

The great arrow struck Nephis in the chest, throwing her back like a rag doll. She flew backward and crashed into a military vehicle, deforming the alloy armor plates before falling to her knees.

Sunny was already moving.

He knew, of course, that something like that would not kill Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan — to be honest, he wasn't even entirely sure what it would take to kill her, given her divine ability to heal herself — but his heart still skipped a beat, knowing that she was hurt.

That arrow… what kind of arrow was it? What was its Rank and Class? What enchantments did it possess? Did it carry a deadly venom? Did the arrowhead explode into numerous jagged shards after piercing the victim's flesh?

However, in the next moment, Sunny's eyes glistened under the expressionless mask.

That was because the broken pieces of the arrow dissipated into a whirlwind of sparks. Nephis, meanwhile…

Her waistcoat was torn, and so was the white blouse beneath it. What he saw in the tear was not her alabaster skin, however, but the metal rings of a chainmail shirt — bent, but unbroken.

'That Memory!'

He recognized it from their time in the Tomb of Ariel.

Still kneeling on the ground, Nephis suddenly leaned her head to the side, and the second arrow flew past it. It pierced the heavy military vehicle, dragging it away with the force of the impact, and exploded from the other side in a rain of alloy debris.

'Who the hell is shooting these giant arrows?'

The third arrow was cut apart by Morgan, who severed it with her bare hand.

However, now that Sunny's shadow sense had extended further, he could feel it.

A dozen swift shadows were falling upon them like meteors, each moving with dreadful speed.

Two were aimed at him, and two more at Morgan. One was heading toward Sid, but the rest were all aimed at Neph's heart.

It didn't make sense, really. Considering the distance from which the mysterious archer had shot them, most of the arrows must have been in the air long before the first arrow hit, and very likely before the PTV had exploded. So, the sniper must have accounted for everything — how the three Saints would react to the explosion, where Nephis would be thrown back, how Sunny would move…

What kind of skill was that? Was the mysterious archer a prophet? Or did the arrows possess a mind of their own, altering their paths to

pursue their prey?

Sunny had to deal with the strange arrows before there would be a chance to find the answer.

'There's not enough time!'

He raised a hand and simply caught one of the great arrows from the air, sliding back a few steps before its momentum dissipated.

Sunny had already started to manifest countless shadows when a haunting song suddenly resounded above the silent park, drowning out all other sounds.

Sound was invisible, and yet he sensed the song move past him like a ghostly river. In the next moment, the great arrows seemed to have hit a wall in the air, splintering and scattering in different directions.

Looking back, Sunny saw Kai closing his mouth as he rushed toward the burning remains of the PTV.

'...Good job, buddy!'

Sunny's shadow sense had already reached the limits of his perception, encompassing a vast part of NQSC.

However, no matter how much he searched, he could not sense the mysterious archer. That meant one of two things.

Either the sniper had the ability to avoid his detection… or the arrows had been shot from beyond the range of forty plus kilometers.

Sunny felt a hint of chill, wondering who would have been able to shoot enchanted arrows from such a distance, and with such precision.

A Master? Possibly, with the right Aspect… but quite unlikely.

A Saint?

An Echo of a high Rank?

Catching Kai's glance, he gestured in the direction from which the arrows had come. A split second later, his friend… former friend… shot into the air, flying toward the possible location of the attacker.

But, somehow, Sunny doubted that the sniper would be caught. They must have escaped immediately after sending the arrows loose, and would be long gone by now.

Looking back, he studied the scene of devastation.

Broken vehicles, pieces of burning debris, dozens of wounded soldiers groaning on the ground.

Nephis was slowly rising to her feet, white flames dancing in her eyes. Morgan lowered her hand, a deep scowl replacing her usually composed expression.

Sid had just landed on her back, rolled over her shoulder, and jumped to her feet, hissing in pain.

The whole attack had only lasted a few seconds.

But the impact it had left… was bound to have long-lasting consequences in the days to come.

And maybe even beyond that, far in the future.

Chapter-1740: No Traces

Sunny had been right — the archer was long gone by the time the arrows hit. Kai flew all the way to the edges of the city, searching for the sniper with his miraculous vision, but found no trace of them.

He did discover the sniper nest on the roof of a dormitory tower in the outskirts, close to fifty kilometers away from the Nightmare Gate. However, there were no clues to be found there — only a few footprints in the snow, and punctured concrete where the arrows had been thrust into it for ease of access.

The arrows themselves were Memories, and had either dissolved after being destroyed or disappeared after being dismissed.

There were no functional cameras in that area of the outskirts, so no records remained to identify the attacker.

The sniper, whoever it was, had disappeared like a ghost.

…By the time Kai returned, the park looked like a disturbed anthill. Nephis had insisted on healing the soldiers who had been hurt in the explosion, and there were no casualties. But an attempt on the life of one of the two princesses of Valor — or maybe even both of them — was no small matter. Government forces flooded the scene, both to take care of the Gate and to investigate the scandalous event.

There was nothing they could find, of course, but doing nothing was not an option.

Sunny had accompanied Nephis as she healed the soldiers and received their gratitude, both admiration and devotion burning in their relieved eyes. Then, he followed her to the side of a medical vehicle, where Morgan was waiting for them while typing something on her communicator with a cold expression. Sid, the Fire Keeper, was walking behind them sullenly, her civilian clothes in disarray.

That was where Kai eventually found them.

The charming archer relayed his findings with a troubled look on his face.

"...we will conduct a thorough investigation on the scene, of course. But I am afraid that we won't find anything. There is no physical evidence left, and since the attacker was careful enough to eliminate these traces, they would have had means to throw off our divination experts, as well."

He looked at Nephis with guilt in his eyes.

"I am sorry. There is not a lot that the government can do."

She grimaced silently.

...Morgan, however, was more vocal.

Looking at Kai with a frown, she said in a cold tone:

"NQSC is your territory. Please forgive me for being blunt, Saint Kai, but the government is allowed to exist because it is useful, maintaining order in the waking world. If members of my clan can be freely attacked on your land, with no consequences… then what use is there for the government?"

He met her sharp gaze somberly, not saying anything.

She scoffed and shook her head.

"Fine. Whatever. My little sister answered the call and hurried to prevent a Gate crisis, in her usual selfless manner, but ended up being struck by human arrows. Once the news gets out, what do you think will happen?"

Kai frowned, still having nothing to say.

However, Sunny was staring at Morgan, instead.

'She brings up an interesting point.'

How had this ambush been possible, to begin with? It took a lot of time to plan an assassination, especially if the target was a Saint. However, their decision to answer the emergency alert had been made on the spur of the moment. No one could have known that Nephis would be in this park, on this day.

The only way to predict her actions would have been to know about the descent of the Gate in advance, as well as getting access to her schedule.

Had the government known about the Gate long before, but held back the information? Why would they?

The location Morgan had chosen for the meeting was too conveniently close to the emerging Gate, as well. Was it a coincidence, or had she really known what would happen?

Sunny tilted his head a little, an amusing thought surfacing in his mind.

'...Did Valor send the sniper themselves? Why would they try to dispose of Nephis now?'

Had the ambush even been an earnest attempt to kill Nephis? Sure, a different Saint could have been killed by those arrows, but it was very doubtful that she would have been seriously harmed. But then again, very few people really knew the full extent of Neph's abilities. The party responsible for the assassination attempt could have simply misjudged how hard she was to kill.

Too many things seemed strange about this incident. One fact was undeniable, though… the entire situation smelled fishy.

Nephis finally spoke, placing a hand on Morgan's elbow.

"Morgan. That's enough."

The Princess of War gave her a long look, then shook her head.

"No matter. Even without any evidence, there are very few archers in the world who are capable of something like that. The government might not have the means, but we of Valor do. It won't be hard to

find the suspect after investigating each of them. And when we do… mark my word, Saint Kai, there will be hell to pay."

He bowed, hiding his face from view.

"As you wish, Lady Morgan."

Sunny was tired of seeing his friend being bullied… by someone else… so he turned to Nephis and asked, hoping to turn the conversation in a different direction:

"How did you know that the PTV would explode?"

She glanced at him, hesitated for a few moments, then looked away with a shrug.

"You probably don't know, Lord Shadow, but there were many attempts on my life when I was younger. I have… a lot of experience with this sort of thing. It's easy to notice if a vehicle has been tampered with, if you know where to look. I always do."

Sunny stared at her silently.

'But I do know. You've told me before. I even witnessed it in your dreams.'

That was what he wanted to say.

But, of course, he didn't.

Soon, a convoy of heavily armored vehicles appeared near the entrance to the park — these ones painted in the colors of Clan Valor, not the government. Morgan looked at the convoy and put her communicator away with a heavy sigh.

Glancing at Kai, she lingered for a moment, and said with a semblance of decorum:

"I will be going, then. Please inform me immediately if there is any news about the investigation, Lord Kai."

Then, she turned to Nephis:

"Are you coming? You must be tired after healing all these people."

Nephis considered it, then shook her head.

"I'll catch up with Kai. You go. There has to be a lot of things you have to deal with."

A dark smile appeared on Morgan's face.

"Ah, yes. I do now. Are you sure, though? Who says that there won't be a secondary attack? If someone manages to kill you, father will be terribly cross with me."

Nephis raised her chin a little.

Her voice remained even when she said:

"...Is there someone who can kill me?"

Morgan remained silent for a bit, then chuckled and turned away.

"Suit yourself. Well, my sister is right. If someone manages to kill her, they would have worked really hard…"

With that, she nodded to Sunny and walked away.

"Until we meet again, Lord Shadow!"

Soon, her elegant figure disappeared from view, leaving him alone with Nephis and Kai.

Sunny sighed behind the mask.

'So… these two are going to catch up.'

There was no place for him at their friendly reunion.

So, it would be better for him to leave, as well.

He opened his mouth, intending to say something curt and aloof… but to his surprise, Nephis spoke first.

Giving Kai a poignant look, she turned to Sunny and asked:

"Lord Shadow… would you mind keeping us company?"

Chapter-1741: Best Policy

They left the impact zone in a government transport. The ride was much less luxurious than Neph's destroyed PTV, but Sunny, who had crossed countless kilometers in shaky military vehicles, did not mind.

'...I wonder how much that PTV cost.'

If Sunny had lost something that lavish and expensive, he would have been cursing the dead gods and drowning in bitterness. But Nephis did not seem to mind the loss too much.

Granted, her mood seemed a little strange.

As they drove past the burned remains of the PTV, she stared at it intently, a distant look in her eyes.

"Are you alright?"

Sunny wished that it was him who had asked that, but the Lord of Shadows was not that considerate. So, he had kept silent, and Kai spoke in his stead.

Nephis lingered for a few moments, then looked away from the wreckage and sighed.

"Sure. It's just that… the situation is so familiar. But the outcome is entirely different. Times have changed."

It seemed that she was reminiscing about the past, just like Sunny. He had contemplated how different the dread of having to face a Nightmare Gate for the first time felt from today's battle, where he did not even have to lift a finger. Nephis, meanwhile, must have been comparing the powerlessness she had felt as a child to today's attempt on her life.

The difference had to be quite startling, considering that she was one of the most powerful Saints in the world now.

The transport moved along the streets of NQSC at a moderate speed. The news of what had happened, however, was spreading much faster.

Sunny did not even want to imagine what kind of storm would rise when people learned that Changing Star, humanity's darling, had almost died to a human assassin while defending innocent lives from a descending Nightmare Gate.

The people responsible for the government's propaganda would be losing their minds by now. They were great masters of both disseminating and suppressing information, but this time, the incident was too sensational, and the parties involved were too renowned. There was no stopping this story from spreading far and wide, so they could only try to control it the best they could.

The government… was in a tight spot.

It was a bit ingenious, actually. Nephis was so beloved and venerated largely because the government had once decided to make her into a shining symbol for the whole of humanity — she had worked very hard to build upon that foundation, of course, but the government was responsible for the initial push.

Now, however, someone had taken the fruit of their labor and used it against them. The public outrage caused by an attempt on Changing Star's life would be proportional to the amount of effort the government had put into turning her into someone who was revered and admired by all.

That reputation of hers had only grown more exalted in the last four years, reaching unimaginable heights.

…Was the assassin's real goal to undermine the government instead of killing Nephis?

Sunny continued to contemplate who was behind the attack while the transport rolled across the streets of NQSC, eventually reaching a

remote district.

There, a modest manor stood apart from the bustling city, surrounded by a tall wall.

This was the manor of the Immortal Flame clan, which served as the base of operations for the Fire Keepers in the waking world.

The transport passed the security check and made its way to the underground vehicle stable. Kai sent the driver and the guards assigned to Nephis by the government away. Sid also bade them farewell and left, lamenting the state of her tattered clothes under her nose. The loss of the expensive ensemble seemed to bother her much more than the recent ambush.

'The Fire Keepers are certainly a strange bunch...'

Nephis led her two guests to a secure room in the depths of the manor.

Noticing how well-protected it was, both from modern means of surveillance and through extensive use of runic magic, Sunny realized that what she had planned wasn't really to catch up with Kai.

He had suspected as much.

He looked around with outward indifference, then pulled out a chair and sat down.

"...I am guessing this is not a simple reunion among friends."

Kai remained standing, leaning on a wall with one shoulder, while Nephis sat across from Sunny and nodded.

"Indeed."

He tilted his head a little.

"May I know what the purpose of this meeting is, then?"

Nephis smiled faintly, remained silent for a moment, then looked at Kai.

"Do you know what Saint Nightingale's Flaw is, Lord Shadow?"

'Ah.'

Sunny leaned back, perfectly relaxed.

"He can sense lies, does he not?"

Kai's Flaw wasn't exactly advertised, but he had also never made a point of keeping it a secret. So, anyone who wished to know would have known.

Nephis nodded.

"Yes. I thought we'd have an honest conversation, you and I."

As a habitual liar, Sunny couldn't help but grow tense at these words. There were so many things he was deceiving the world about… had she learned one or two of his secrets? Which ones? How much trouble was he in?

Of course, that was not necessarily the case. Nephis could have simply wanted to discuss something that did not tolerate falsehoods.

In any case, none of Sunny's worries showed in his body language.

In fact, he smiled behind the mask.

After maintaining silence for a couple seconds, Sunny shrugged.

"Why not? I am the most honest person in the world, after all. Two worlds, even."

Nephis stared at him for a moment, then glanced at Kai.

Kai studied Sunny with a very strange expression, hesitated for a bit, and gave her a short nod.

…She seemed perplexed.

Sunny suppressed a chuckle.

"So, what did you want to discuss with me, Lady Nephis?"

Nephis frowned slightly. However, her voice was even when she spoke:

"We've been dancing around the issue for a while now. You gave me plenty of hints, subtle or not… we are supposed to be allies, so what I want to discuss today will decide how far our alliance will go. If you don't mind, I will ask you a few questions. The nature of our partnership will depend on your answers."

He remained silent, voicing no objections.

She lingered for a while, then nodded and said:

"First and foremost… I am quite curious. You seem to be very keen on knowing how I would kill a Supreme, Lord Shadow. What exactly makes you think that I, a princess of the Sword Domain, am so interested in regicide?"

Sunny stared at her silently, cold darkness nestling in the eyes of his emotionless mask. His onyx armor glistened with a sinister luster in the dull lamplight.

Eventually, he spoke in an aloof tone:

"I can answer your question with three of my own."

Nephis raised an eyebrow.

"Oh?"

He nodded, then said evenly:

"Who attempted to kill you as a child? Why? And what would I do in your place after becoming a Saint?"

His voice turned even colder than usual.

"Imagine that a bunch of traitors killed my father, conspired to ruin my clan, and turned my life into living hell. The further into hell I fell, the higher these despicable ghouls rose. Ah… if something like that happened to me, I would have been positively peeved."

Sunny shrugged.

"In short, it's because I know enough about you, Lady Nephis."

She studied him for a while with a deadpan expression, then glanced at Kai. Receiving his confirmation, Nephis scowled.

Her voice sounded a little flat:

"I must say… my sister was right. You are indeed very well-informed for a recluse, Lord Shadow."

Chapter-1742: Good Reason

Sunny grinned behind the mask.

"What can I say? I wasn't always a recluse."

She contemplated for a few moments, and eventually nodded.

"Alright. Then, my next question. Let's presume that you are correct, and I do, indeed, harbor such an interest. But what about you? What is your reason?"

Sunny chuckled.

"Would you believe me if I said that my reason is exactly the same as yours?"

Nephis thought for a moment, then shook her head.

"Not really."

He tilted his head a little.

"Well, fair enough. It's not. In truth, I don't have as great a grudge against the Sovereigns as you do. I do despise them a great deal, true, but to answer your question… I guess it has to do with what I desire."

She pierced him with a heavy gaze.

"And what is it that you desire, Lord Shadow?"

He laughed coldly.

"Oh, nothing much. A nice house with a scenic view, somewhere warm and pleasant. Tasty meals and good company. Enough money for a comfortable life. Safety and well-being… stuff like that."

Nephis blinked a couple of times. She seemed quite surprised by that answer.

"You live in a dark temple in the middle of a Death Zone, surrounded by dreadful Nightmare Creatures. But all you desire… is a nice house and tasty food?"

Sunny stared at her emotionlessly.

"Don't forget the good company."

He paused, then added evenly:

"You might think that it's a simple wish, Lady Nephis. But that is the thing… in this world we live in, even a simple wish like that is insurmountable. One would have to be a god to live without worries. No. Actually, even becoming a god might not be enough."

She frowned.

"What does it have to do with your enmity against the Great Clans and the Sovereigns?"

He remained silent for a few moments.

When he finally spoke, his voice sounded dark and sinister:

"The root of my enmity lies in the fact that they insist on dictating the shape of the world where I live, while not possessing enough competence to keep it safe. Their methods, their callousness, and their hubris are both misguided and loathsome. What better proof there is than this war they are about to start?"

Sunny shook his head.

"In other words, I disdain the notion of allowing the Sovereigns to decide my fate. I would rather have the power to make such decisions for myself. I've fought long and hard to gain it."

Kai nodded silently, signaling to Nephis that he was telling the truth.

She took a deep breath and looked at Sunny silently.

Slowly, white sparks ignited in her eyes, and a faint smile appeared on her face.

"Next question, then. You could have moved independently or made alliances with all kinds of other people. Yet, you chose to build a relationship with me. Why?"

Sunny stared at her for a few moments, then shrugged.

What was he supposed to answer?

"...Because you are Changing Star."

Noticing a silent question in her eyes, he added somberly:

"You know… people these days tend to dismiss the value of a proper education. Take basic language skills, for example. Very few make an effort to earnestly learn the runic languages of the Dream Realm, relying on the Spell to do the translating for them. If they did, however, they would have known what your True Name really means, Lady Nephis."

Sunny smiled, hiding behind the motionless mask.

"You are not a star that changes, but rather one that causes change. A star that brings ruin and misfortune, but also opportunity. We live in a time of great upheaval, and is there a better person to forge an alliance with than someone who is fated to be at the center of all these calamities?"

He chuckled.

"Someone like me, who is not fated for anything, can do worse than to attach myself to someone like you. It's even better if I place you in my debt. A common enemy, a shared fate, and a little bit of leverage… is the perfect foundation for a lasting alliance, don't you think?"

Sunny finished speaking and looked at Kai. The charming archer hesitated under his gaze, then nodded slowly.

'There. That should be enough.'

…However, this time, Nephis did not look to Kai for confirmation.

Instead, she stared directly at Sunny and said:

"You are lying."

He frowned, taken aback.

After a long pause, Sunny said in an even tone:

"Hasn't Saint Nightingale just confirmed that I'm not?"

She shook her head lightly.

"Kai has the ability to discern lies, but he is too honest, and too decent. There are many ways to deceive someone by telling the truth, and that is what you are doing, Lord Shadow. You are not telling me everything… which is fine. I don't need to know all your secrets. But I do need to know if we really share a common enemy, and why you've decided to become my ally."

Sunny remained silent for a while.

'Damn it.'

She had forgotten him, so why had she not forgotten all his lessons in deceit?

Eventually, he sighed and looked away.

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then allowed the mask of indifference the Lord of Shadow wore to crack a little, revealing a glimpse of sincerity.

"Someone… told me once that people like me are born to destroy things, not build them. That this world needs killers and destroyers more than it needs saviors and builders. Well, they were right."

He looked at her, hiding behind an expressionless mask.

"I am indeed best at killing. However… you know, there are people building things all over the Dream Realm today. There is a young girl

building a road somewhere in the Song Domain right now. Elsewhere in the Sword Domain, a young father is developing a farm to feed his wife and child. These people might not be as powerful as me, or as ambitious as me. They can't slay Nightmare Creatures as well as me.

But they matter, too."

Sunny grimaced and added evenly:

"That young girl, that farmer's child, and countless others like them. Ah, it's a bit embarrassing to admit… but I hope that all the killing I do will change the world into a shape that allows them to live their lives building new things. Even if they have to build them on the ruins that people like us, Changing Star, leave in our wake."

He leaned forward a little:

"How is that for a reason?"

She remained silent for a long while, looking at him calmly.

Eventually, it seemed as if Nephis accepted his answer.

She sighed, then asked nonchalantly:

"Do you serve any of the three Supremes?"

Sunny shook his head.

"I don't."

She nodded.

"Are you planning to betray me?"

He chuckled.

"Not particularly."

Nephis raised an eyebrow. Then, she smiled slightly.

"Are you hiding anything from me, Lord Shadow?"

Sunny shrugged.

"A great deal of things."

She looked at Kai, received his confirmation, and then leaned back in her chair.

"Fine. This is acceptable. Then… I'll be honest, too."

At that moment, the door opened, and someone who Sunny had very much not expected to see entered the room.

Jet glanced at him with a scowl, then turned to Nephis and said, her voice harsh:

"This guy reeks of death."

A crooked smile twisted her lips.

"...I like him."

Chapter-1743: A Small Group of Committed Citizens

Sunny was surprised to see Jet here. She was one of the executive leaders of the government now, after all. Someone like her was not supposed to visit members of a Great Clan unannounced…

Not that he wasn't happy to see her.

Jet was exactly like she had been before. Her ivory skin, raven-black hair, and icy blue eyes made for a striking sight. Despite the fact that she had risen much higher in the government hierarchy by now, her uniform was pretty much the same — it was just that there were four stars on the insignia instead of three.

If anything had changed, it was that she seemed even more sleep-deprived than usual. If that was even possible.

Sunny found himself staring at her without meaning to… but for a very different reason than he had during their first meeting.

It was just good to see her, after all that time...

Jet stared back at him.

"You must be the Lord of Shadows."

He nodded and answered evenly:

"You must be Soul Reaper Jet."

She studied him for a moment, then raised an eyebrow.

"What's up with the Halloween costume?"

'Huh.'

Sunny tilted his head, contemplated her question, and asked seriously:

"What is Halloween?"

Jet blinked a couple of times. Eventually, she waved a hand at him.

"Never mind. I've heard a lot about you, Shadow. It's nice to finally put a face to the name. Well… sort of."

'So, no one is going to explain to me who this Halloween is? Rude.'

Sunny frowned behind the mask.

"Only the good things, I hope."

Jet grinned.

"Well. They say that you rule a Death Zone, eat Cursed Nightmare Creatures for breakfast, wrestle Titans for fun, and can turn into all kinds of terrible monsters on a full moon."

He stared at her somberly.

"That is preposterous."

She nodded and wanted to respond, but before she could, Sunny added in an even tone:

"I can turn into all kinds of terrible monsters any time I want. What does the moon have to do with it?"

Jet seemed to forget what she was supposed to say.

Standing beside her, Kai suddenly choked on thin air.

Sunny smiled silently.

Looking at Nephis, he asked:

"Lady Nephis, you mentioned that you would be honest with me. I wonder what you were about to say."

She lingered for a moment, but it was Jet who answered instead:

"Officially, I am here to placate Nephis on behalf of the government. To tell you the truth, this assassination attempt saved me a lot of trouble — otherwise, I would have had to come secretly. Actually, I am here to meet you, Shadow."

Sunny studied the two of them, having a few guesses about what was about to happen.

Nephis nodded.

"We are waiting for a couple more people, as well."

Almost as soon as she said it, Sunny became aware that someone else was in the room. He shifted his gaze, noticing that Cassie had appeared at some point, standing quietly beside a wall.

The darkness nestling in the eyes of his mask seemed to grow even more impenetrable.

"Song of the Fallen."

She bowed lightly.

"Lord Shadow."

It wasn't that strange that he had not sensed her approach — Sunny could still feel the underlying fabric of existence rippling around them subtly, somewhat akin to the shockwave of an opening Nightmare Gate. It was a strange sensation that only Saints could feel, announcing that someone had crossed over from another realm nearby.

Cassie must have arrived directly from Bastion.

But then, Sunny sensed something else…

A terrible premonition!

In the next moment, there was the sound of energetic footsteps, and Effie entered the room gingerly.

She looked around, and her gaze settled on Sunny.

He tensed immediately.

'Gods. What is that woman going to say now?!'

Effie stared at him for a few moments, then smiled.

"Hey."

With that, she turned to Nephis:

"Way inferior to Master Sunless. I bet he can't even cook. Stay strong, Princess!"

Nephis closed her eyes.

Sunny, meanwhile, opened them wide.

'What the hell do you mean, way inferior?! How can I be inferior to that lazy bastard?! I mean… we're the same person!'

Cassie had a very strange expression on her face.

Nephis exhaled slowly, remained motionless for a moment, and opened her eyes again.

"Lord Shadow. Meet Saint Athena, Raised by Wolves."

Sunny stared at Effie, lamenting the fact that looks could not kill.

Or rather, his looks could not. There had to be an Awakened out there somewhere with such Aspect, and definitely more than a few Nightmare Creatures.

He said emotionlessly:

"...She's loud."

Effie gave him a dirty look and grinned.

"Wanna arm-wrestle? If you win, I'll shut up."

Scowling behind the mask, Sunny tilted his head and stared at her some more. He was tempted, but did not wish to destroy the table.

"I don't."

She laughed.

"Good choice!"

With that, she finally sat down.

Now, there were six of them, sitting around a table. Which, coincidentally, was round.

Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan. Saint Cassia, Song of the Fallen. Nightsinger Kai, the Dragonslayer. Saint Athena, Raised by Wolves… the War Beast. Soul Reaper Jet.

And a mysterious Transcendent known as the Lord of Shadows.

The five Saints looked at him, while Sunny stared back at them silently.

'...The cohort is all here.'

He secretly looked around.

The room where they had gathered was not exactly opulent... but something told him that history was going to be made here today.

He could practically sense it in the air. The omen of ruinous change.

Sunny sighed and said evenly:

"It seems that I've found myself in illustrious company."

Nephis remained silent for a while, then sighed.

"I told you that the nature of our partnership would depend on your answers, Lord Shadow. Your answers were satisfactory, so… I've decided to trust you. Enough so, at least, to bring you into the inner circle. These people are my closest confidants."

She paused, then added after some deliberation:

"Usually, I would not have been so quick to trust someone. But time is not on our side, and my instincts tell me that you deserve it. I've asked Saint Kai to help me confirm this feeling… I hope you won't take offense. Saint Cassia advised me to take this step, as well."

Sunny remained silent for a moment, then said in an aloof tone:

"What a strange group. Two renowned Transcendent warriors of the Sword Domain. Three exalted champions of the government. And me… a stray that has no master. Why, exactly, are the six of us gathered here together?"

Nephis looked at each of the gathered people slowly.

Then, she shrugged and answered in her usual even tone:

"Because the six of us are going to destroy the Sovereigns."

Chapter-1744: Changing the World

The six of them… were going to destroy the Sovereigns.

Sunny was silent for a while, staring at the members of the cohort from behind his expressionless mask. Then, he chuckled.

"You want to topple both Domains and completely change the world… with just six people?"

Nephis remained composed and gave him a nonchalant shrug.

"Why not? Wasn't the world I want to change shaped by just three?"

He had no retort. The current shape of the world had indeed been dictated by three powerful individuals — Anvil of Valor, Ki Song, and Asterion. For the past two decades or so, they had been acting as the gods of humanity, deciding its fate from behind the curtains.

And now, Nephis and her cohort were preparing to rise in rebellion against the gods.

It was strangely poetic. It was also a little ominous, as if history was repeating itself.

Sunny sighed.

"So, you are welcoming me into your underground revolution club. Well… fine. That has been my intention all along, as well. But now that we have reached this point, I need to ask you the same question again, Lady Nephis. This time, in a less hypothetical context. How do you plan to defeat the Sovereigns?"

She met his dark gaze calmly.

"My answer stays the same. By attaining Supremacy myself."

His gaze suddenly turned much more intense.

"Oh? Have you… found a way to become a Supreme without challenging the Fourth Nightmare?"

Sunny would lie if he said that he wasn't interested in hearing the answer. He had been trying to discover the secrets of Supremacy himself, after all — in Neph's case, she couldn't challenge the Fourth Nightmare because she wasn't allowed to. But in his case, he simply couldn't — without the Spell, coming into contact with Nightmare Seeds was meaningless.

Not only was Sunny unable to enter a Nightmare, but getting too close to a Seed put him at risk of becoming corrupted.

Nephis inhaled slowly, a hint of tension appearing in her eyes for a short moment.

"Did I find a way? This is… a complicated issue. In a sense, yes — I did find a way to become Supreme. However, I am still searching for the means of actually walking that path."

Sunny frowned behind the mask.

"You will have to be more specific than that, I'm afraid."

She looked away and smiled faintly.

"Each Aspect is unique, and so, the paths to Supremacy are unique for each individual. At the root of it all lies the act of imposing your will upon the world, thus attaining authority over it. But the actual imposition differs from Aspect to Aspect, as does the process. It all depends on one's source element."

For now, what Nephis was saying followed Sunny's own guesses.

What she said next, however, surprised him:

"My source element… is longing. Desire, yearning, passion, inspiration. The more people I inspire to feel a sense of longing, the

more of them become a part of my source element. By building up my source element, I am building the foundation of my future Domain. In fact… it has already been built."

Sunny stared at her wordlessly.

'Huh.'

Suddenly, he saw many of the actions Nephis had taken in the last four years in a new light. The tireless wandering, the endless battles against the tide of Nightmare Creatures, the wordless compliance with being sent to handle the most deadly of calamities over and over again, the public appearances… even the theater plays secretly funded by Cassie.

Sunny tilted his head a little.

'So… has Cassie secretly built her own propaganda machine to prepare for Neph's ascent to Supremacy?'

It seemed very likely.

He turned his head and stared at Jet.

She smiled at him lazily.

"Yes. While Nephis and Cassie were working hard on their side, I've been subtly pulling the strings of the government to fan the flames. The initial decision to make Changing Star into a martyr was not my decision, but the reason why we haven't abandoned this narrative after she was adopted by Valor, and instead doubled down on it, is my doing."

Sunny remained silent for a few moments.

"I understand why Changing Star is doing what she is doing, and why Song of the Fallen is supporting her. But what about you, Soul Reaper? You as well, War Beast and Nightsinger. Why has the government decided to bet on her?"

Jet chuckled.

"The government… is less monolithic than it has been before. The older generation is too stuck on the idea of maintaining neutrality. It has served them well in the past, so they are naturally biased and assume that it will continue to work. But I am of the opinion that they are wrong. In this new world, neutrality is a myth.

No one will be allowed to remain on the sidelines once the Sovereigns start fighting for dominance… let alone if one of them becomes a true hegemon."

She shook her head.

"The government itself is different now, as well. Our power has grown greatly in the wake of the Chain of Nightmares… countless Awakened never left after becoming part of the Evacuation Army, and while we have few Saints, the ones we do have are among the most powerful ones in existence. For all intents and purposes, the government is like the fourth Great Clan now.

Maybe even the third, considering the dwindling influence of the House of Night."

Jet paused for a moment, then sighed.

"And that is an inevitable process. Soon enough, the Dream Realm will become humanity's new home. In that future, the role of the government will have to change — if we don't adapt, we will disappear. Which is not really a problem, since we would have served our purpose… but then, the question is, who will rule that new world?"

A dark smile appeared on her ivory face, never reaching her cold blue eyes.

"The King of Swords? The Queen of Worms? Or the third one? None of them are qualified."

Sunny looked at her with curiosity.

"Why do you say that?"

He had his own reasons to believe that the Sovereigns were not the

best choice to guide humanity. But Jet had always been very practical… what was her reason?

She chuckled.

"Ah. Sorry… it's nothing too philosophical. Actually, my reason is very simple. It's because Changing Star has gone from a mundane girl to a Saint in about five years, while the Sovereigns have been stuck at their Rank for decades. Once we are all living happily in the Dream Realm… what will the one who wins the war do when an Unholy Titan wanders out of a Death Zone?

Will they be able to contend with the future? I don't think so, so I am betting on someone who would. Because I know that Nephis won't be satisfied with mere Supremacy."

When Jet finished speaking and gave him a relaxed smile, Effie added in a calm tone:

"Big Sister is mainly preoccupied with the end result, but as for me… I care about how we get there, as well. It's not enough to just preserve the world, it's also important what kind of world it will be. Right now, the stuck-up Legacies are looking down on everyone. Drives me nuts, really… can you imagine how much worse it will become once all of humanity is living under their roof?

The kings, the queens — I don't trust any of them, but I do trust Nephis. She, at least, won't stop me from becoming a Supreme myself. If anything, she'll probably push me into a Nightmare Seed…"

Nephis did not comment on that, making Effie smile.

"...You would, wouldn't you? See, she's not even denying it!"

After that, Kai broke the silence, speaking simply:

"I just believe that it is the right thing to do. No more… but also no less."

Sunny stared at them for a while.

Eventually, he shook his head.

What could he say?

"You are all crazy."

Then, he smiled behind the mask.

"...Fortunately for you, I am as well. Fine. I like it. Let's conquer the world."

Chapter-1745: Missing Catalyst

After making the bold proclamation, Sunny paused for a moment, and then added in an emotionless tone:

"Or rather, two worlds. One more, one less… it doesn't really make a difference."

Jet chuckled at his words, while the others just nodded with varying degrees of seriousness. Only Nephis did not react, simply looking at him calmly.

Sunny sighed, leaned back a little, and said evenly:

"However, let us return to the initial conversation. Lady Nephis, you said that your source element is the people whom you inspire, and that they are the foundation of your Domain. However… what comes next? How do you plan on building upon that foundation to actually reach Supremacy?"

He was quite stumped. It seemed that Nephis was half of a step ahead of him — she had dived deeply into the nature of her source element, to the point of being able to enhance it. Sunny, however, had never even questioned whether his connection to the shadows could be deepened.

What was he supposed to do? Actively try to build rapport with the wild shadows? Turning them into his zealous followers? Would that bring him closer to Supremacy, as well?

'No, I am thinking about it wrong.'

Nephis had said it herself, and he knew it too — each Aspect was unique, and the process of realizing a Domain differed for each Awakened. What worked for her would not work for him, and vice versa.

She had to weave a vast tapestry of yearning souls, inspiring people one by one. But his source element was shadows — as their Lord, he already enjoyed the veneration of every shadow in existence.

Sunny had no need to build a foundation for his domain…

Or did he?

If there was a process of accumulation involved in the initial stages of attaining Supremacy, then what was he supposed to accumulate?

The thought resonated with him so deeply that even the humble shopkeeper stopped what he was doing, far away in Bastion, frowning for a moment.

'...Isn't it quite obvious?'

Unseen, Sunny's eyes gleamed under the mask.

Had he not been accumulating something from the very start of it all?

The legion of silent shadows dwelling in his soul… were they the foundation of his future Domain?

Shadow God had been the God of Death as well, after all. Was Sunny limiting himself by ignoring the connection shadows had with death?

If so… what the hell was the nature of his Domain supposed to be?

He grimaced, feeling more lost than he had been a minute ago.

'Maybe Nephis will enlighten me.'

Sunny waited patiently for her answer.

…Sadly, he was doomed to be disappointed.

When Nephis finally spoke, a slight frown twisted her brow:

"That… I am not sure about. As I've said, I know the path to Supremacy, but am unable to walk it yet. There has to be some kind of catalyst that will ignite the foundation I've built, turning it into an actual Domain. The soul, the source element, the world — once all

three are fused together by will, a Sovereign is born. But how to fuse them? I do not know."

'...Damn it.'

Sunny sighed secretly.

Well, it would have been too easy if the answer was handed to him on a platter.

He remained silent for a while, then asked somberly:

"So, what you are saying is that you must become a Supreme to defeat the Sovereigns without drowning the Dream Realm in the blood of mundane humans. However, you have no clue how to actually achieve it. Therefore, this whole uprising of ours… is a gamble?"

Nephis smiled faintly.

"When has anything been without risk in this life? If you know a way to become Supreme, Lord Shadow, I am all ears."

He tilted his head and stared at her emotionlessly.

"If I knew a way, would I still be a Saint? The last Sovereign I killed was not very talkative, so I didn't have a chance to ask."

In fact, Daeron of the Twilight Sea had been entirely incapable of speech by the time Sunny killed him.

Kai's chair suddenly wobbled.

Nephis spared him a glance, then chuckled.

"Indeed. However… it is not entirely up to fate. In fact, I have a reason to believe that there will be progress soon."

Sunny raised an eyebrow behind the mask.

"Oh? How so?"

She lingered for a moment.

"Once the war starts and we enter Godgrave, there will be plenty of Great Nightmare Creatures around, as well as some Cursed ones. Watching how they impose their will upon the world might give us a clue. More than that, in the later stages of the war, Anvil and Ki Song will take to the battlefield personally. Observing them will be even more illuminating."

Nephis paused, then added evenly:

"Additionally, I am moving toward a breakthrough in mastering my Aspect Legacy. I suspect that receiving that boon will be of great help."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

Her Aspect Legacy? The last time he had glimpsed her runes, only one of the seven fruits was unlocked — the Knowledge of Fire. It deepened her already startling connection to that element and bestowed knowledge upon her, including the True Names having to do with flames.

What other branches were there? Knowledge of Souls? Knowledge of Authority? What knowledge was she hoping to receive?

He remained silent for a moment, then asked directly:

"What kind of breakthrough are you seeking?"

Nephis met his gaze and answered calmly:

"Knowledge of Passion. I've been studying passion as of late, and have already made great strides in mastering it."

Now, it was Sunny's time to wobble!

It took all his self-control not to fall out of his chair. He remained still through sheer will, not allowing even a hint of his emotions to show in his body language.

'P—passion?! How is she studying passion?! What great strides?! What exactly is she mastering, and with whom?!'

Outwardly, Sunny remained calm.

But internally, he was fuming!

After a long silence, he asked evenly:

"What does… passion… have to do with anything?"

Nephis looked at him with a hint of confusion.

"It has to do with my source element, of course. What else?"

Sunny let out a mental sigh of relief.

'It's alright… it's all fine. She's not practicing… passion… with anyone.'

Luckily, the conversation could be safely guided elsewhere.

…Or so he thought.

Because right at that moment, Effie suddenly said:

"Oh, right. I am sure that it's not the case, but if Master Sunless is having trouble making you achieve a… breakthrough… tell him to come see my husband. Let the man learn from the master! That guy is a real veteran…"

Something fell on the floor noisily.

Kai silently covered his face with a palm. Jet's smile widened a little. Cassie turned her head, pretending to look away.

Sunny was appalled.

'Who says I need to learn anything, you vile woman?! I am myself a… wait… why am I even thinking about her nonsense?! Damnation!'

Nephis looked at Effie in confusion.

"Isn't your husband an Awakened? Plus, Master Sunless is a real veteran, too. And what does he have to do with my Aspect Legacy?"

Sunny felt vindicated.

'Thank you! No, stop… what?'

Effie stared at Nephis with a strange mix of mischievousness and exasperation. After a few moments of silence, she said in a low tone:

"Princess… you mean that he served in Antarctica, too. Right?"

Neph's confused frown deepened.

"Of course. What else could I mean?"

Effie sighed and waved a hand in the air, giving up.

"Forget it. Gods, why do I even bother…"

Chapter-1746: Just War

After Sunny was introduced to the general shape of the plot, more technical details had to be discussed. The war was approaching swiftly, and at least three of the six conspirators would have to participate in the bloodshed directly.

The other three could be drawn into the deadly game between the two Sovereigns, as well. Both the government and the House of Night were desperately trying to maintain neutrality… but it was unknown if the Great Clans would cross the line in exerting pressure, thus making at least one of the neutral sides an accomplice in the Domain War.

Jet seemed a little troubled.

"Our position was more or less stable before. But now, with that damned assassination attempt… I don't know. The situation is unclear."

She glanced at Cassie and raised an eyebrow.

The blind seer seemed distracted for a moment, then said quietly:

"The news is spreading like wildfire, both in the waking world and in the Dream Realm. By now, it's all people are talking about. Everyone is outraged, of course… even the Legacy Clans are incensed. The situation is much more fiery in the Sword Domain — incendiary, even — but the Song Domain is reacting badly, too. Neph's influence transcends borders."

Jet frowned.

"That was fast. Too fast, even."

Cassie nodded.

"Someone has been prepared. They are adding oil to the fire."

As everyone fell silent, Nephis said in an even tone:

"I wonder... who is responsible, this time."

Jet looked at her, lingered for a few moments, and smiled crookedly.

"It wasn't your own performance?"

Nephis frowned slightly, not exactly offended by her words, but seemingly displeased. Her answer was short:

"No."

Sunny listened with interest.

Actually, he had considered that the whole thing was staged by Cassie, as well. That would be in line with both her goal and her cunning. However, a few things didn't add up.

Nephis leaned back and sighed.

"My first thought was that it had been planned by Morgan. But it's not really her style… if Morgan was behind the assassination, there would have been countless victims among the government soldiers. She is always thorough, after all."

Jet crossed her arms, considering. Eventually, she simply shook her head and said with a hint of frustration in her voice:

"Then who the hell did it? It couldn't have really been Song, could it?"

Kai seemed troubled, as well. He remained silent for a while before saying cautiously;

"Actually, it could have been. Princess Morgan was right when she said that there aren't a lot of archers in the world who can pull off something like that. The two prime suspects, coincidentally, are from the Song Domain. One is Silent Stalker. The other is Dar of the Maharana clan."

Sunny smiled darkly behind the mask.

'That guy.'

He had considered Dar of the Maharana clan, as well.

The man had an eerie ability to hit targets from a great distance, and was fond of using oversized arrows to boot. Sunny had brushed sides with him during the Dreamscape Tournament, almost catching a few of those arrows himself. Later, they crossed swords in the elimination rounds, where the Legacy scion was cut down by Mongrel.

He had not left a good impression.

Maharana was one of the vassal clans of Song, too…

Effie scratched the back of her head.

"Dar of the Maharana clan? Last I heard of him, he was a Master. Where is he now?"

Cassie answered a moment later, effortlessly pulling the information out of her head:

"He is presumably still a Master. Although… no one has seen or heard of him in the last six months. He could have challenged the Third Nightmare and Transcended in secret. Or died trying."

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, then spoke in his usual aloof tone:

"I can tell you who is behind the assassination attempt."

He had not been certain before, but now, the pieces fit together too perfectly.

The rest of them looked at him, waiting for an explanation.

Sunny leaned forward a little.

"Your instinct was correct, Lady Nephis. It was indeed Morgan… well, or at least Clan Valor. Of course, they never really intended to

kill you."

Nephis nodded.

"That much is clear. No one who would want to kill me is stupid enough to try so half-heartedly. But why are you pointing at Clan Valor?"

He grimaced behind the mask.

"The assailant had to know your schedule. They also had to know that the Nightmare Gate would lure you into the open. Of course, the sniper could have tried to hit you on a crowded street, or even through several walls… but that park was too convenient of a location for that kind of attack to be a coincidence.

I am pretty sure that Morgan knew about the Gate in advance and chose the location of our meeting accordingly — I assumed that she wanted to gauge my power, but she simply wanted to deliver you to the impact zone."

Sunny paused for a moment, then shook his head.

"No, actually, it is more likely that she wanted both. The Princess of War is very efficient, after all… her actions rarely pursue only one goal."

Effie frowned.

"Why do it, though?"

He stared at her silently for a moment.

"As I've said, Morgan's actions tend to accomplish several goals at the same time. So, why stage an attempted assassination on her little sister? The first reason is quite obvious, since you and your fellow government representatives are suffering the outcome right now. It is to discredit the government and gain leverage against it.

Soul Reaper mentioned that your position has been destabilized… by playing the indignation card and acting offended on behalf of their adopted daughter, the elders of Valor are now in a position to put

pressure on you to join their side."

Jet chuckled.

"Just that much leverage won't be enough. Well... most likely."

Sunny nodded.

"Yes. But that is only because discrediting the government is merely a secondary goal of the entire affair."

Kai frowned, then asked him somberly:

"What is the primary goal, then?"

Sunny sighed behind the mask.

"You know, there are a lot of nasty rumors flying around the Song Domain about Clan Valor. How people from the Sword Domain are monopolizing resource shipments from the waking world to make their lives more miserable. How most of the elders of Valor, including the King of Swords himself, have been taken by the Skinwalker.

How people there are suffering under the tyranny of corrupt Legacies, and cry out to the heavens for help."

He leaned back and shrugged.

"Of course, plenty of such rumors are spreading about Clan Song in the Sword Domain, as well. The Queen of Worms is a rotten fiend, she kills innocent people to enslave them into her undead army, the Song sisters feed on human blood — stuff like that. All these rumors are false, naturally… well, except that last one. That one might actually be true.

In any case, they are carefully prepared and spread by both sides, for a single purpose."

An expression of disgust appeared on Kai's face. He remained silent for a few moments, then uttered through gritted teeth:

"...Justification."

Sunny nodded.

"Indeed. The Great Clans need to warm up the populace to the idea of war. Not only the masses, but also the Awakened warriors who will be fighting on the frontlines. I am sure there is a version of it for the vassal clans, as well, not that those have a lot of choice when it comes to obeying the Sovereigns. So… for those of you who are fond of history… you must know what casus belli is."

The faces of several people in the room darkened.

Effie coughed.

"Casus belli… sure. We all know it, of course. But to those of us who don't… can you explain? Please?"

Sunny was tempted to tell her to ask her husband for an explanation, but held himself back.

Instead, he said in an emotionless tone:

"Sure. There is not much to explain. Casus belli is just a fancy term for justification. An official reason given when starting a war. An assassination of a royal is more than enough reason to drown the world in blood. In fact, this exact scenario was used before to do just that."

He chuckled coldly.

"Honestly, I would have expected Valor to actually kill one of their Saints in order to have a more solid claim. But either someone among them is growing soft, or they can't allow themselves to lose even a single Transcendent before the war. In any case… someone attempts to kill Changing Star, humanity's favorite Saint, and both of the main suspects just happen to be from the Song Domain.

One of them is even conveniently unavailable for questioning. This is more than enough ground to spin a pretty tale."

Sunny sighed.

"As for the fact that none of the government soldiers had died, which

is unlike how ruthless Morgan usually acts… that is the result of a shrewd calculation, as well. If the purpose of the assassination attempt is to make Clan Valor look like the wronged party, then wouldn't it be counterproductive to make the government suffer more losses than Clan Valor did?

Who would look like the true victim then? So, it was all part of the plan."

His cold voice echoes in the room, sounding more than a little bit sinister. As everyone was digesting his words silently, Sunny laughed.

"Well… at least that is how I would have done it. With more flair, of course."

Nephis looked at him somberly, not saying anything.

Eventually, though, she spoke in an even tone:

"So… they had someone pretend to try and kill me while using the method that would point at someone serving Ki Song. This gives them the ammunition they need to both declare war and maintain the illusion of righteousness… eventually. And, as an added bonus, they even get a chance to pressure the government into making concessions, or even joining their side entirely."

He nodded.

"More or less."

Nephis sighed and looked away.

She remained silent for a while, then said quietly:

"Well… good. It plays into our hand, actually. If I become the catalyst for the start of the war, it would only be logical for me to be the one to end it."

At that moment, Cassie spoke, her voice a little grim:

"If they are already moving so openly, then it seems that we have even less time than we thought. I'm afraid… that some of our plans

will have to be accelerated, or even abandoned entirely."

Sunny scowled behind the mask.

'Yeah. Like me forging a sword for Nephis. I doubt I can make it in time… can I?'

Nephis gritted her teeth.

"It has been a long time coming. All we can do is prepare ourselves the best we can. When Song and Valor go to war… the only side that shall win is us."

She looked at the people gathered in the room, her gaze settling on Sunny.

Suddenly, a faint smile appeared on her face.

"Or, we'll die. Lord Shadow, that favor I owe you… you'd better call it in soon. You might not get the chance later."

He crossed his arms and stared back at her.

'Who gave you permission to die?'

Sunny smiled slightly behind the mask, then said in a cold tone:

"...You are too weak right now. Become stronger first."

Nephis remained silent for a moment, then chuckled.

"Alright. If you insist that I become stronger… it seems that I have no other choice. I will."

Soon after that, the secret meeting ended. The members of the cohort left — some openly, some in secret. Sunny himself simply crossed the border between the realms, returning to the Nameless Temple. There was a lot for him to do.

Outside the manor of the Immortal Flame clan…

The engines of war were churning, and the world was moving on.

Chapter-1747: The Infamous Lord Mongrel

In the days following Sunny's appointment as the Memory Purveyor of the Fire Keepers, the Brilliant Emporium had undergone a transformation. Once established as a cover for his ability to weave sorcery, the Memory Boutique was suddenly thriving due to the high number of acquisition deals flowing through it… almost as if he was a real merchant.

The Fire Keepers were quite generous. Nephis did not enjoy the favor of the Valor elders, so her private troops rarely received resources that a princess's personal guard deserved — they existed on a pitiful stipend that wouldn't cover the needs of fifty Awakened, let alone half a hundred Masters. Nevertheless, they were quite rich.

Their riches did not come from the Great Clan, but from their own exploits instead. Every time Valor sent Nephis and her Fire Keepers to deal with a terrible calamity of some sort — which happened on a regular basis — countless abominations would fall to their swords.

That meant that there would be many Memories and Echoes brought back from each expedition, as well as valuable materials harvested from the Nightmare Creatures. The Fire Keepers kept the best for themselves and sold the rest. That way, they were quite self-sufficient, and their coffers never ran empty.

Cassie managed the assets of the Fire Keepers, investing in various enterprises throughout the Sword Domain. In fact, many establishments in Bastion and other young cities had been funded by her on behalf of Nephis, not only bringing in stable income, but also adding to Changing Star's reputation. There was a sizable charity fund established by the Fire Keepers, as well, helping people in need.

In short, Nephis was quite affluent despite being shunned by the

elders of Clan Valor.

And now, Sunny was benefiting from her wealth, as well…

There were a lot of mocking rumors about him in Bastion these days, calling him names and detailing what it was exactly that he was doing for Nephis in exchange for her money and gifts. But Sunny didn't mind… in fact, he was of the firm belief that everyone talking nonsense about him were simply jealous.

Who wouldn't want to receive expensive gifts and attention from a stunningly beautiful young lady? What was there to feel shame about? If they did not know how to put themselves in such an envious position, it was their problem… plus, of all the things Sunny had learned over the years, shame wasn't one of them.

He had none, to begin with.

In any case, the Brilliant Emporium was now handling the flow of Memories in and from the Ivory Island, collecting a commission from each deal. Granted, the Fire Keepers weren't selling much these days… they were, however, on a spending spree. The war was just beyond the horizon, and everyone who knew anything about it was in a hurry to arm themselves as well as possible.

Aiko was so giddy that Sunny was seriously concerned that the petite girl would explode from the excitement. Her greed and love for money put even his own prodigious avarice to shame.

The deal with the Fire Keepers was not the only reason why the Brilliant Emporium was doing better than usual, though. The restaurant side of the business was booming, as well.

And the reason for that was not just Sunny's face. Well… it was, in a manner of speaking.

The real reason was that damned duel with Tristan of the Aegis Rose clan. Sunny had expected that playing the role of Changing Star's lover would attract a lot of attention, of course…

What he had not expected was how much the citizens of Bastion loved to gossip, and how much free time they had on their hands!

'These people…'

There were no empty seats in the dining hall, and apart from a couple of regulars, the rest of the crowd was here for only one reason — to catch a glimpse of the despicable mongrel who had cunningly bewitched Changing Star!

The thrill seekers had even scared away his regular customers. Fewer and fewer of them were showing up in the Brilliant Emporium each day, to Sunny's chagrin.

He could hear the hum of their whispers from the kitchen:

"I saw him! Good gods… I was on the fence before, but now I really understand Lady Nephis…"

"No way! That bastard is deceiving her… he must be a Song spy!"

"What spy? Why would people from the Song Domain send spies here?"

"What, you haven't heard? Their creepy queen is just straight evil. She even sent assassins to kill Lady Nephis!"

"She wouldn't dare!"

"It's true! Everyone is talking about it… that's why I think that this mongrel is a spy…"

"Quiet, you idiot! What if the mongrel hears you? Don't you know how many people he massacred in the castle?"

"Still… he doesn't look like a spy… he's too dreamy to be a spy…"

Stuck in the kitchen, Sunny gritted his teeth and concentrated on cooking.

'...That's Lord Mongrel to you, fools!'

He was tempted to spit into the pan.

Of course, he didn't. Fools or not, he had a reputation to uphold.

Sunny did not care if his name was being dragged through the mud.

But no one was allowed to besmirch his cooking!

In the end, he was almost relieved when it was time to close the shop. Sunny chased away the last customers, locked the door, and collapsed onto the Shadow Chair in utter exhaustion.

'What a contradictory feeling.'

On one hand, he was tired of hearing idiots talk trash about him.

On the other hand, the idiots paid a good amount of coins to spend time in the Brilliant Emporium. So…

It was a good thing, overall?

Sunny remained motionless for a while, then sighed and descended into the Memory Boutique. There, Aiko was busy checking the descriptions of the Memories she had recently purchased.

She was in charge of the whole operation — not only because she had better business sense than him, but also because Sunny was unable to receive and transfer Memories, like all carriers of the Nightmare Spell could.

The Memories he crafted had to be designed with the customer in mind. Sunny had stolen a trait from the Shard Memories of the Forgotten Shore, which had the ability to bind themselves to those who touched them. After modifying it a little, he was able to devise a way to bestow the Memories on the clients without transferring them directly from his own soul.

Which meant that for the deals concerning purchased Memories, he needed an Awakened courier. Aiko played the role splendidly, delivering the Memories to the Fire Keepers in person.

"How is it going?"

The petite girl looked up from the documents and grinned.

"All accounted for, boss. We even managed to find a weapon with the

weird combination of enchantments that Master Shim requested. Damn, it's still strange to call that guy a Master... I remember how he used to nag the older Hunters for losing all their shards gambling with me, back in the Bright Castle…"

Sunny smiled.

"Good, then. Make a trip to the Castle tomorrow… come back early, though! I won't survive in the kitchen alone."

Aiko shuddered at the word "early", then sighed and gathered the documents.

"See you tomorrow, boss."

Soon, she was gone.

Sunny had followed her onto the porch and remained there for a while, watching the sun set.

And the full moon rise.

Tonight was the night he had to meet Cassie again.

Chapter-1748: Precious Moments

Cassie was waiting for him near the same toppled tower as the last time. She was just as ethereally beautiful as the last time, too, bathed in moonlight and standing on the edge of tranquil water.

However, the atmosphere of their meeting was different today.

It was more… familiar, somehow. Perhaps even friendly.

When Sunny emerged from the lake, Cassie smiled faintly.

"Sunny."

He brushed his wet hair back and smiled, as well.

"Lady Cassia."

She shook her head lightly.

"It feels unfair that you are still maintaining decorum after insisting that I should be more informal. Call me Cassie, please."

He hesitated for a few moments, then nodded.

"Alright, Cassie. Shall we go? I am hoping to explore as much of the mirror labyrinth as possible tonight."

She nodded and offered him her small hand.

Sunny took it and pulled them both into the shadows, teleporting straight to the underground chamber they had discovered before. This time, there was no need for her to guide him deep into the ruins of the Castle, erasing the memories of the Knights patrolling it.

The chamber had not changed at all, which was a relief. Sunny vividly remembered the warning Cassie had given him about the Others, so he was wary of the beings that lived inside the mirrors in the former stronghold of the Demon of Imagination.

Summoning the Shadow Lantern, he drowned the maze in shadows without wasting any time. Soon after, Sunny and Cassie continued to explore the labyrinth.

'This place is vast…'

They had wandered it for hours the last time, and were not making any noticeable progress tonight. Slowly, Sunny was starting to grow wary.

He remembered the Nightmare Desert and the black pyramid standing at its center. No matter how long one walked across the white dunes, the pyramid never drew closer… was there some sort of trickery preventing him from reaching the heart of the labyrinth, as well?

They walked in silence for a while, but quickly grew bored of it.

Eventually, Cassie spoke:

"I must admit, Master Sunless… Sunny. You are a fascinating man."

He raised an eyebrow.

"I am?"

The blind seer chuckled melodiously.

"Indeed. I suspected that you were, of course, when we first met. But knowing it and witnessing it in person are two different things. That stunt you pulled with poor Master Tristan… I pride myself on being able to predict things, you know! However, that caught me by surprise. What were you thinking?"

Sunny coughed quietly.

What was he thinking, indeed?

He kept quiet for a few moments, then said nonchalantly:

"Well, thinking too much is bad for one's health. Back then, I was thinking… gods, I want to punch this buffoon so much! And so, I did. It's all about the little joys in life."

She drew a sharp breath.

"I… guess."

Sunny grinned.

"Anyway, it ended up working in our favor, didn't it? We wanted everyone to get the wrong impression about the nature of the relationship between me and Nephis. Well, mission accomplished."

Cassie exhaled slowly.

"...A little bit too well, even."

He glanced at her.

"Whatever is worth doing at all, is worth doing well."

The blind seer did not find what to answer. She remained silent for a while, then laughed quietly.

"True. Then, there is your true body, the Lord of Shadows. Meeting him in person was quite an experience. The contrast between him and Master Sunless is quite striking, to say the least. I applaud your acting skills."

Sunny looked at her curiously, hesitated for a bit, and then smiled.

"Why, thank you. But actually, you are wrong."

Cassie raised an eyebrow elegantly.

"I am?"

He nodded.

"This is my true body. The Lord of Shadows… is a shadow. He's a

performance."

She tilted her head a little, baffled.

"Wait. You mean to say that this… the shopkeeper... is your true personality? And the aloof Saint of Godgrave is merely an act?"

Sunny smiled, then sighed, and eventually looked away.

"...Yes? But also no. I guess each of my incarnations is me, it's just that they have different purposes. The purpose of the Lord of Shadows is to be a warrior. So, the parts of my personality that have to do with conflict take the lead. The purpose of the humble shopkeeper is to live peacefully and enjoy life.

So, he's a bit of a homebody."

He paused, and then added with a shrug:

"It's not that strange. We all wear different masks when dealing with different people. A person will behave one way when they are with their family, act differently when they are with their colleagues, and put on a new mask when they meet their friends. I am much the same, it's just that I have many bodies, so I can wear all the masks at the same time."

Cassie looked at him thoughtfully.

"Isn't it easy to lose sight of your true self that way?"

Sunny smiled.

"You might not know, but I am the world's topmost expert on not losing my true self. Shadows are formless and shapeless by nature, so I have to be careful not to forget the shape of my soul."

She lingered for a while, then let out a wistful sigh.

"I'll have to ask you for advice one day, then. I also struggle with maintaining my sense of self. Living through other people's senses, and experiencing their innermost memories… can be disorienting, sometimes."

Cassie smiled, then asked in a gentle voice:

"But, speaking of the Lord of Shadows… can I ask you something?"

Sunny glanced at her briefly.

"You can."

She nodded, hesitated for a moment, and said:

"Before, you asked me to keep the true identity of Master Sunless to myself, saying that Nephis would not trust either if the connection between him and the Lord of Shadows was revealed. But now, you are not a stranger to her anymore. She has accepted Lord Shadow into her inner circle and entrusted him with her life. Likewise, Neph is… uh… sympathetic toward Master Sunless. Why maintain the charade?"

Sunny did not answer immediately, contemplating her question.

Why did he want to keep that secret?

He hesitated for a while, then sighed.

"Because it's fun."

It was a callous answer, but a truthful one. Well, of course it was — otherwise, he wouldn't have been able to give it.

There was no strategic reason to keep Nephis in the dark anymore. And yet… Sunny was enjoying himself too much to let it go, already.

Nephis did somewhat trust the Lord of Shadows now. But she was also wary of him, because anyone who possessed such power would make people wary.

The humble shopkeeper, however, wasn't powerful at all. So, she could allow herself to be at ease around him. And to Sunny, such moments were… precious. They were much closer to the relationship they had before becoming Saints than the courteous distance between her and the Lord of Shadows.

He didn't want to lose these moments, yet.

Cassie let out a small laugh.

"Fun? Well… I have to admit, it is indeed a lot of fun. However…"

She lingered for a moment, and asked quietly:

"Don't you think that it is unfair to her, to keep such a secret?"

Sunny kept quiet, the smile slowly disappearing from his face.

Eventually, he let out a sigh and lowered his head.

"You are right. It is indeed unfair. But don't worry… I'll tell her soon."

He looked ahead and added with a hint of regret in his voice:

"I'll tell her before the war starts. Until then… well, Master Sunless should probably make an effort to enjoy his last days of peace as much as possible."

The two of them continued to explore the labyrinth, sometimes keeping silent, sometimes chatting about this and that.

Sadly, Sunny failed to solve the maze this time, as well.

Not long before the dawn came, he found himself back in the underground chamber, face-to-face with Cassie.

It was time to show her another memory.

Chapter-1749: Leave It All Behind

The battle had just ended, and the Winter Beast was gone.

The dark ecstasy of having killed the butcher of Falcon Scott had washed over Sunny's heart and receded like a tide.

Leaving it cold and hollow. Dark and utterly devoid of light.

There was nothing binding him to the world anymore. He was banished from the Nightmare Spell, fate, and existence itself. In the whole world… two worlds, actually… not a single soul cared whether he lived or died. No one even remembered that he existed.

Facing the cruel truth of that loss was too painful, and so, Sunny longed to leave it behind.

…He opened his eyes in a familiar hall. Warm sunlight was pouring through the stained-glass windows, painting the ivory walls with vibrant colors. Heavy chains lay on the floor, arranged into a flawless circle. The sky was vast and blue outside.

The Ivory Island floated on the sea of clouds, enveloped by a peaceful silence.

Sunny had not wanted to come here. In fact, he wanted nothing more than to avoid this place at all costs. However, this was where his soul was anchored to the Dream Realm, and so, this was where he had arrived after giving up on the waking world.

Standing in the center of the chain circle, Sunny shifted slightly and dissolved into the shadows.

The Ivory Tower was mostly empty right now — most of the Fire

Keepers were still lost in the depths of their Nightmares, while Nephis and the rest of the cohort were too busy to visit it often. Still… he didn't want to be seen by anyone.

They could not remember him even if he told them who he was, so there was no point.

Sunny glided across the floor as a shadow, hiding in the darkness near the gate. Then, he extended his shadow sense outward and froze. On the emerald grass outside the great pagoda, two people were walking toward its gate.

The sunlight suddenly seemed brighter.

He kept himself hidden when they entered the sunlit hall. Nephis was frowning, while Cassie followed her with a strangely lost expression on her delicate face.

Sunny remained motionless as he unwillingly eavesdropped on their conversation.

"...are you sure?"

Cassie nodded slowly.

"Yes. I… I think I am. The future has grown too… elusive to decipher."

Nephis halted and remained silent for a few moments.

"Can it be connected to your Transcendence? Or witnessing that thing in Verge?"

The blind girl hesitated briefly.

"That was what I thought, as well. However, I've reached out to several seers in confidence. They all seem to be having trouble glimpsing anything from the future, as well… all over the world."

Neph's scowl deepened.

"What can be the reason? An aftershock of the Dream Gates being

open? The Chain of Nightmares itself?"

She shook her head and continued walking.

"We will have to investigate it later. Right now, there is too much to do… it is pure pandemonium out there, with so many people suddenly arriving in the Dream Realm. The refugee camp outside Bastion is lacking provisions and manpower, with too few Awakened to guard them against the Nightmare Creatures. At least there is no lack of water, but... all of it was too sudden.

The situation can swiftly descend into a disaster."

Cassie sighed.

"I heard that they are going to build a city on the lake shore. And with the Sleepers of Antarctica having Awakened, there are much more capable warriors now than before…"

Nephis nodded.

"Still. I am going there to help."

The blind girl remained silent for a moment.

"I see. I'll go with you, then."

Sunny hid in the shadows, listening to the news about the tribulations of humanity without interest. What did it have to do with him? Nothing at all… not anymore.

Nephis shook her head.

"Someone has to stay here to welcome our people once they return from the Nightmares. Plus… you have another important task to accomplish."

Cassie raised an eyebrow.

"You… you really want to do it?"

Nephis gave her another nod.

"It is time to abandon the Chained Isles. We are too far away from everything important here. I want you to fly the Ivory Island south, toward Bastion."

With that, she turned around and walked into the circle of chains.

Standing there, Nephis frowned and briefly touched her face. She remained motionless for a while, then said somberly:

"...Why do I feel like I'm forgetting something?"

Cassie did not answer, simply standing there with a confused expression.

Eventually, Nephis grimaced.

"That other issue… have you been able to discover anything?"

Cassie slowly shook her head.

"No. I talked with Effie and Kai again, Jet too. But it's hard to dispel the fog that's clouding some of our memories. I think… it must have been Torment who had done something to us. But what? And why?

And when? There is no answer yet."

Nephis sighed.

"Keep digging. I'll do some research, too."

Soon, she was gone, returning to the waking world.

Cassie did not move for a while, standing there with her head lowered.

Eventually, she whispered quietly:

"What has she done to me?"

With that, she turned around and descended into the basement of the Ivory Tower, where the runic controls of the island were located.

Sunny was left alone.

He exhaled slowly and emerged from the shadows, looking in the direction where Cassie had gone.

Torment… did she really believe that her Defiled twin had been capable of doing something like that? The timeline didn't make sense, and Cassie knew it.

Well, it was a reasonable theory to make. Torment's power… Cassie's power… had to do with manipulating memories, after all.

For a moment, a desperate hope ignited in his heart. What if Cassie could restore the memories of him with her Transcendent Ability? What if he could make them remember?

But no… he knew that it was impossible. If it was, she would have already done so, restoring her own lost memories first.

'...I'm sick of it.'

He gritted his teeth and walked out of the Ivory Tower.

By now, the Crushing was of no threat to him. Sunny wasn't sure if he could endure its terrible pressure, but he also did not need to. The range of his shadow sense had grown enough to reach the distant islands, so he could simply step through the shadows to leave the Ivory Island behind.

He contemplated for a few moments, considering if he should.

What was he going to do, anyway? Live like a hermit in some godforsaken corner of the Dream Realm? Leave to travel the unexplored regions of this dreadful world, away from where any human could see him?

Jump into the Sky Below and try to reach its bottom out of curiosity?

Each alternative was as good as the next one.

Well, jumping into the Sky Below was probably a bit worse than the rest…

Sunny remained still for a while, thinking.

In the end, he did not use Shadow Step to reach the flying island far below.

Instead, he circled the great pagoda and headed toward the graceful gazebo, where the portal to the Ebony Tower stood.

If he remembered correctly, there was a chamber in Nether's scorched tower where the walls were engraved with countless runes.

Sunny had not been able to understand those runes before, or at least retain the understanding of the ancient daemon's words.

After his visit to the Estuary, however…

Who knew what he would be able to learn?

Chapter-1750: Nothing But Time

The Ebony Tower was just like the last time Sunny had seen it — floating ominously in a boundless black void, with a sea of fire burning above it relentlessly.

The Fire Keepers had established an outpost here, but after the Chain Breaker gained the ability to brave the Crushing, they only maintained a token presence in the Sky Below. Now that Neph's followers had left to challenge the Nightmares, there was not a soul around.

He stepped out of the black arch on the highest level of the obsidian pagoda and remained there for a while, staring into the distance. Somewhere far away, in a different world, one of his shadows was following Rain… Sunny had to think of a way to approach her openly, but his current mental state was too volatile to try.

'...I'll think of something later.'

Nothing moved in the Sky Below. Nothing disturbed the cold silence. Rid of the suffocating pressure of human company, he felt… comfortable, for the first time in a while. Or at least numb.

There was consolation in solitude.

Sunny exhaled slowly, then allowed the Onyx Mantle to retreat back under his skin. With his military bodysuit in tatters, he was left practically naked — after hesitating for a bit, Sunny allowed the wild shadows to envelop his lithe body, and manifested them into a semblance of soft fabric.

Summoning the Endless Spring, he satiated his thirst and left the sixth level of the Ebony Tower.

The fifth level consisted of one large chamber. It was shrouded in

darkness, with countless runes covering the obsidian walls. These runes were the reason why Sunny had chosen to come to this place.

He stared at them emotionlessly.

'I knew it.'

Before, Sunny had been unable to read the forbidden runes. In fact, simply beholding them had almost killed him… but things were different now. Not only had he grown vastly more powerful since his day as an Awakened, but he had also received the revelations of madness from the Sin of Solace.

Thanks to that, he glimpsed the secrets that Ariel had left behind, and was seemingly inoculated against the power of the forbidden runes by the knowledge of the Forgotten God.

And so… Sunny did not feel repelled by the runes carved into the walls of the Ebony Tower anymore. All he felt was a slight sense of discomfort.

Of course, he still had to be careful when studying them — the knowledge of the Void that a daemon was capable of enduring could very well plant seeds of Corruption into his Transcendent Soul, and there was no telling if any of it was mixed between the passages concerning the Forgotten God.

There was also a bit of a problem…

Nether had not used the runic alphabet Sunny was most familiar with while leaving the notes on the wall, and since the Spell never translated the forbidden runes, he could not do it himself from memory. After years of wandering the Dream Realm and exploring ancient ruins, he could somewhat decipher the meaning, but a proper translation would take a lot of time.

Which was fine.

Sunny had nothing but time, these days.

He did not get to work immediately, though. What was the rush?

Instead, Sunny left the fifth level behind and descended lower. He passed the solemn shrine on the fourth floor, the workshops on the third floor, the divine flame reservoir on the second floor — where Weaver's arm had once been left to burn, devoured by the harrowing rot — and finally reached the first level of the Ebony Tower.

That was where the Fire Keepers had established their living quarters.

The central chamber had been shrouded in darkness once, but now, it was brightly lit by a multitude of enchanted lanterns. Sunny counted them calmly and smiled.

Each of the lanterns was a Memory belonging to one of the Fire Keepers. They had been left behind here for a reason. For as long as the master of the lantern was alive, their lantern would continue to glow. If they perished, the lantern would dissipate into a rain of sparks, destroyed with the rest of their Memories.

There was a similar chamber in the Ivory Tower, which could tell if any of them had died.

From the look of it, the Fire Keepers were doing well in the Second Nightmares. The number of lanterns had not dwindled at all… at least not yet.

Looking away, Sunny walked over to one of the cots and fell on it heavily. As soon as his head hit the pillow, his eyes closed on their own.

He was tired…

It was time to sleep.

Tomorrow, his new life as an aimless wanderer would begin.

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Sunny woke up feeling refreshed.

It was still strange to him, to sleep while one of his incarnations stayed awake. In such moments, his consciousness seemed to split, one part of it functioning normally, the other drifting in the

comforting embrace of slumber. He even dreamed sometimes, while simultaneously observing his dreams from the side.

In any case, his mental fatigue lessened no matter which incarnation slept, as long as one of them did.

Rising from the cot, Sunny looked around groggily.

There was nothing pressing he had to do, so he was not in a hurry. He summoned the Covetous Coffer, took out some supplies, and seasoned some monster meat. While it was roasting, Sunny brewed himself a pot of coffee.

Then, he took the pot and the plate of meat outside and ate breakfast while dangling his feet above the bottomless abyss of the Sky Below.

The sea of divine flames above made for a spectacular sky. He enjoyed the views for a while, sipping coffee and not thinking about anything in particular. Eventually, though, Sunny grew bored, and finally returned to the fifth level of the Ebony Tower.

He looked at the runes for a while, eventually stopping near a familiar section of Nether's writings.

Out there on the obsidian wall, a strange map had been carved into the stone.

The Ivory Tower, the Tomb of Ariel, Ravenheart, Bastion, the great vessel that served as the Citadel for the House of Night, the Underworld… and Weaver's Mask placed above the other six landmarks, with a question mark next to it.

The other six strongholds were only marked by a single rune each.

Desire, Oblivion, Dread, Imagination, Repose, Destiny… and "Fate?".

Sunny studied the map with amusement.

It had seemed a bit strange before — after all, there were no borders, no terrain, no measure of distance between the strongholds. They all seemed strangely disconnected, as if there was no map at all.

Now, of course, Sunny knew the daemons had built their citadels in different realms, and so, it could as well have been a realm map. It was only after the Dream Realm had assimilated all mortal realms and five of the six divine realms that the daemonic strongholds ended up connected by land.

Finally, his gaze settled on the carving of Weaver's Mask.

Nether had not known where his eldest sibling dwelled, or if there was such a place at all.

Perhaps Weaver had been a homeless wanderer, just like Sunny.

Smiling darkly, Sunny looked away from the map and turned his attention to the runes.

Chapter-1751: Why Did the Flame Wane?

The work progressed slowly.

There was no day or night in the Sky Below, and Sunny did not particularly care for tracking time anymore. He only knew how much of it had passed because of the happy shadow, which continued to act as Rain's guardian somewhere far away.

The task of learning how to read the forbidden runes was engrossing.

Sunny was not trying to decipher the ancient script blindly. He was familiar with many variations of the runic language that had been used in the Dream Realm… or rather, in the multitude of realms that would one day become its various regions. The languages the people of the bygone eras had spoken were different, and so were the writing systems they had used.

However, they all shared a common root… Hope, who had invented the concept of writing and the original runic script. Being familiar with that script and many of its descendants, Sunny could somewhat infer the meaning of derivative runic languages, and learn how to read them.

That task was not an easy one, even for a Saint — but after spending a few weeks in the Ebony Tower, doing nothing but studying Nether's writings, he was making quick progress.

Sunny studied the runes, took walks along the edge of the scorched island, slept, and lay idly on his cot, staring at the ceiling. His life was tranquil, easy, and entertaining.

Truly free of all burdens.

…Sometimes, he felt the desire to claw at the walls of the Obsidian Tower.

In those moments, he visited the lightless shrine and stared at the statue of the Goddess of Black Skies.

The face of the statue was obscured by a veil, but the sculpture was so exquisitely carved that the veil seemed to be made from fine silk, not cold stone. He could see a vague silhouette of a divinely beautiful face, outlined by its delicate folds and creases.

Sunny couldn't help but feel that it shared a close resemblance to the faces of the broken porcelain dolls that piled into a mountain on the lowest level of the tower… as well as Saint's inhumanly beautiful visage.

Had Nether been obsessed with Storm God, or simply too lazy to sculpt a multitude of faces when there already was a perfectly fine one for him to copy? He had been a very practical man, after all… as well as the most impractical of them. Why else would he rise in rebellion against the gods?

As Sunny made advancements in his understanding of the forbidden runes, he was able to make a rough estimate of when exactly the Demon of Destiny had resided in the Ebony Tower.

It had been in the latter half of the Golden Age, during Hope's imprisonment. Nether seemed to have already fallen out with Storm God, but was not contemplating going to war against the heavens yet.

Instead, he had turned his back on the world and dedicated himself to his misguided passion — trying to create living beings, which was an authority exclusive to the gods.

Much like Sunny had turned his back on the world and dedicated himself to studying these forbidden runes.

The Ebony Tower seemed to attract disheartened men.

Most of the runes carved into its walls were… esoteric, to say the least. Sunny slowly learned how to understand their meaning, but that did not mean that he understood what they meant. It would be

the same if someone had given him a highly advanced scientific paper on quantum physics to read — knowing human language would not help him comprehend the contents.

The fact that Nether's writing had never been meant to be read by anyone except the Demon of Destiny himself did not help, either. He had left these notes for himself, so they weren't very detailed.

There were many passages like:

"Dissected. Structure, pathways, flow. Basic mechanics hide the deep complexity of process and function. Material?"

Or:

"Correlation or causation? Potential hints at obsolescence. Source unknown, observation flawed."

Sunny could not really understand the meaning of these passages, but he did discern several underlying themes.

Nether's goal was to create a living being, and as such, his research had been developing in two directions — the creation of a body, and the creation of a soul. The former was purely time-consuming, but the latter seemed to vex the daemon to no end.

How did the gods will souls into existence? Why were the creatures created by the gods able to propagate, giving birth to new souls? What was the secret? There was no answer.

The Demon of Fate had created weaving, while the Demon of Desire had created runic sorcery. The Demon of Destiny, however, had not authored an original school of sorcery of his own, taking elements from wherever he felt useful and bending them to serve his purpose.

However, he had possessed the deepest understanding of soul power out of everyone Sunny had known, except for the gods themselves. Nether had been able to manipulate souls and soul essence to a frightening degree, accomplishing things that should not have been possible.

And yet, he had not been able to create a living being out of nothing,

no matter how ingenious his methods were and how great his determination was. That was one thing that the Demon of Destiny could not build.

…For a time.

Sunny knew that the daemon had eventually succeeded, creating Saint and her people. His perception was influenced by knowing the end result, but back then, Nether must have been daring to the point of insanity, to pursue something that had never been done before, and was not supposed to be possible.

What had motivated him to persist in his seemingly hopeless endeavor?

Sunny did not know, and doubted that he would learn the answer in the Ebony Tower. The runes carved into its walls were Nether's research notes, not a personal diary — there was no mention of the daemon's feelings or emotions, as if he had not been capable of having them at all.

That said… not everything written on the black walls was dry and void of feeling.

After weeks of studying the runes, Sunny concentrated on three fragments, all unlike the rest of the passages he had translated.

The first one seemed like a poem or a short story that Nether had written down for some unknown reason.

It read:

[Why does the flame wane?

I asked the black skies, "What is life?"

The skies answered in a subtle voice, "A mother is watching her children die slowly of starvation. There is only enough food for one of them, but she is hungry, too. That is life."

"The war is over, and those who discarded their weapons to surrender are made slaves. They are brought to an arena and told to kill each

other. A young warrior looks at a sword, his hand trembling. That is life."

"A man loves his wife, but feels lonely in her company. One day, walking the market, he sees a beautiful stranger smiling at him sweetly. He hesitates to return the smile. That is life, as well."

I pondered.

"So… life is a choice?"

The skies laughed, "Life is desire. It is a desire to be alive."

The skies were illuminated by a myriad of stars, burning in the beautiful darkness.

Like the flame of desire had burned in the hideous void, giving birth to the seven gods.

Why does the flame wane?]

Sunny thought about the strange story for a long time. Was it a fable Nether had written down on a whim? Or the transcript of an actual conversation between him and Storm God?

In any case, it had to have meaning. The Demon of Destiny was not someone who would have carved runes into stone without a reason.

He had been trying to create life, so the story could have been a contemplation on the nature of life. However… to Sunny, it seemed like there were many layers to this passage.

The Goddess of Black Skies had described three situations. One was about hunger, one was about the desire to survive, and the last one was about lust. So, had she been trying to say that life was hunger, fear, and lust?

He did not think so. It seemed that the exact situation did not matter too much… what mattered was that the character of each anecdote was faced with a choice. Nether had been the Demon of Choice, so… was that the true meaning of the story?

Somehow, Sunny felt that it was not that important, either.

The truly important part was the first and the last lines of the story.

Why did the flame wane?

The waning flame was, presumably, desire — the primordial desire that had been born in the Void, and gave birth to the gods in turn.

Sunny remembered the murals describing the origin of the daemons clearly, both those that he had seen in the drowned library of Fallen Grace, and those he had seen in the Estuary.

On one, a golden flame was burning in the darkness. On the next, seven figures — the gods — were surrounding the greatly diminished flame.

Sitting on the edge of the Ebony Island and looking at the sea of divine flames above, he blinked.

"No, wait… but really…"

Why did the flame diminish?

The divine flames that had created the Sky Below waned slowly over thousands of years, until only this much was left. One day, they would be extinguished altogether.

But why had the primordial desire waned after giving birth to the gods?

Did it have something to do with the secret of life?

Nether had built the Ebony Tower because he wanted to use divine flame to create living beings, but he eventually abandoned that path and returned to the Underworld. Had he been trying to substitute the flame of desire with the flame of divinity?

All of it seemed too… interconnected, somehow, and encapsulated in the strange story to be a mere coincidence.

However, even if it was, Sunny could not, for the life of him,

understand what it actually meant.

He summoned Saint, shared his theory with her, and asked for her opinion.

…Saint, of course, remained silent, simply staring at him with indifference.

"Thought so."

Sunny clicked his tongue, dismissed the Shadow, and returned to the tower with a sullen expression on his pale face.

Chapter-1752: Reading About Nothing

The second passage he was keenly interested in was much less poetic, but tantalized Sunny much more. That was because it mentioned the other daemons... most of all, the nebulous Demon of Fate.

The runes read:

[Gods created all living creatures, but not all creatures they created carry a divine lineage. Only those born of the gods do, and those born of their descendants. Why have the gods forbidden us seven to sire offspring? Why are we destined for loneliness?

Is it because we are of the Forgotten One, who slumbers in the Void?

Where is the Void, and where is its Gate? How did Weaver enter it, and what did Weaver see?

Why did Weaver decide to break the will of the gods and create a lineage?

Blood, bone, flesh. Soul, spirit, mind. And shadow.

The gods shall discover the transgression, but they cannot.

That is because, having created a lineage, Weaver does not possess a lineage. It has been lost and will be lost, therefore having never been in Weaver's possession. One cannot be punished for something that has never been.

A piece is lost to fantasy, a piece is lost to fear. A piece is lost to respite, a piece is lost to darkness. A piece is lost to sorrow, a piece is lost to rot. And finally, a piece is stolen by a thief.

Weaver's defiance is elusive, just like Weaver is.

But mine will be different.]

Sunny stared at the runes for a while, his eyes burning with wanderlust.

Nether seemed to have been considering the difference between him, the youngest sibling, and Weaver — the oldest. Both had decided to defy the gods, but in a different way.

'Gods created all living creatures, but only those born of them carry a divine lineage...'

It seemed that Weaver had pursued the latter, while Nether had pursued the former.

But more importantly...

'Weaver's lineage.'

Finally, he knew the remaining parts of the Weave. He had already found Blood Weave, Bone Weave, and Soul Weave. Flesh, Mind, Spirit, and Shadow Weaves remained.

'Shadow Weave!'

Would absorbing it make up for Shadow God's lineage that Blood Weave had so unceremoniously devoured?

And if he managed to collect all seven, would the broken lineage of Weaver restore itself to an unblemished state, granting him its full power?

Sunny finally understood why the Weave had been shattered into many fragments, to begin with. It was because Weaver had hidden its existence from the gods by scattering it across the tapestry of fate.

Its fragments had always been fated to be lost, and so, it was as if Weaver had never possessed them at all. The fragment destined to be lost to sorrow was Soul Weave, which Sunny had found near Oblivion's grave. The fragment destined to be lost to rot was Bone

Weave, which he had found here in the Ebony Tower.

The fragment destined to be stolen by a thief was Blood Weave, which the Nightmare Spell had granted him for slaying the Spawn of the Vile Thieving Bird.

At the time when Nether had been carving these runes, Oblivion was still alive, while Weaver had not lost an arm. Therefore, the Demon of Fate had foreseen these events in advance… or maybe even reached into the tapestry of fate to attach the fragments of the Weave to its strings.

One had to be inventive to avoid the gaze of the gods.

But where had the other four fragments ended up?

Sunny looked back at the runes.

'A piece is lost to fantasy, a piece is lost to fear. A piece is lost to respite, a piece is lost to darkness…'

He contemplated for a few minutes, then turned and gazed at the map where the strongholds of the daemons were depicted.

'Fantasy, fear, rest, darkness. Imagination, Dread, Repose, Destiny?'

Were the remaining four fragments of the Weave located somewhere in Bastion, Ravenheart, Stormsea, and the Underworld?

He was suddenly overcome by the desire to travel to Bastion and check himself.

However… that desire quickly dimmed.

Going back to Bastion, Ravenheart, and the great citadel of the House of Night that drifted on the waves of Stormsea meant diving back into the boiling cauldron of humanity.

Sunny had just escaped it. Why would he go back?

The Underworld was a better choice… but also a suicidal one. Sunny was not ready to venture into the depths of the Hollow Mountains.

His strength might have increased explosively after the Transcendence, but true darkness was the natural enemy of shadows. Out there, below the jagged peaks, was the realm of darkness…

Sunny would be nearly powerless there. Blind, weakened, and without an ally.

He could imagine himself braving a Death Zone, but not the Underworld.

'Forget it, then.'

Deeply disappointed, Sunny turned away from the passage and tried to never look at it again.

'Maybe someday in the future...'

The third passage that interested him, coincidentally, had to do with the Hollow Mountains.

But... it was a strange one.

The runes read:

[What can contain the Void?

Nothing can.

Gods used nothing to envelop the void, and placed the cage of desire above it.

In the places where the cage is thin, nothing slips through its seams. The Underworld is one such place, shrouded in nothing.

It is like mist.

However…

Nobody can exist in the mist.

Nothing can contain the Void, and nobody exists within it.

I am wary of nobody, and fear nothing.]

Sunny was utterly bewildered by what he read, and thought that he had messed up the translation at first. But after going over it one more time, he confirmed that the translation was correct.

'Was Nether having a stroke?'

He reread the runes several more times, his bewilderment growing.

'No, he was not someone who would write down nonsense.'

So, the passage must have had meaning. But what was the meaning of nothing?

Sunny pondered the question for a few days, until a tenuous idea surfaced in his mind.

What if nothing… was literally something?

Not the absence of everything, but the presence of nothing.

Just thinking about that made his head hurt.

But it seemed very much like something that the gods would be involved in. These beings operated with ideas and concepts, after all, having shaped the very universe into existence.

So, if nothing could contain the Void… the gods could have gone and literally used nothing to contain it. Enveloping the Void in a layer of nothingness, which the Void Beings could not cross, because nothing could stop them. And bringing down the cage of existence on top of that layer.

That would be a godlike thing to do, wouldn't it?

That nothingness seemed to seep into the universe, though…

Like mist.

Weren't the Hollow Mountains always shrouded in a strange mist?

Sunny opened his eyes wide, remembering how the cohort had escaped a flood of mist on the outskirts of the Hollow Mountains.

Back then, they felt a terrible threat emanating from it, not knowing why.

If that mist was literally nothingness… would they have been erased from existence if it swallowed them?

Sunny also remembered the eerie creature that had come from the mist and demanded that he open his eyes on the Ashen Barrow.

'Nobody exists within it…'

Were there… actual beings born from and dwelling in nothingness?

He suddenly felt a chill running down his spine.

The Demon of Destiny… was wary of nothing, and feared nobody.

Wasn't Nether actually admitting that he felt wary of nothingness and feared the beings dwelling in the mist?

'Goddammit.'

As if the world wasn't scary enough already!

Sunny already had his hands full dealing with the Nightmare Creatures. There were also the Void Creatures, which were infinitely more harrowing than the familiar abominations… luckily, they were locked away by the gods.

And now, there were also Nothing Creatures? Nobodies?

No… he simply refused to deal with that.

'Time to get some sleep.'

Sunny shook his head and left the fifth level of the Ebony Tower, returning to his living quarters.

The translation… was mostly complete.

He had already determined which passages he could understand, which he couldn't fathom, and which spoke too much about the Void, meaning that he had to avoid them at all costs.

Staying in the Sky Below was slowly becoming meaningless.

Perhaps it was time to start thinking about his next destination.

'I'll consider it tomorrow.'

Just before falling asleep, Sunny wondered where he would go, and a sudden thought crossed his mind.

'I don't exist in the memories of the world anymore, so am I a Nothing Creature, too? A nobody..."

Chapter-1753: Runaway

In the morning, Sunny woke up and simply remained on the cot, staring at the ceiling. He felt strangely apathetic.

Yesterday, he had considered whether it was worth it to continue studying Nether's writings. There wasn't much left for him to learn from the runes... as soon as that idea entered his mind, all the motivation and excitement he had been feeling about translating them disappeared. Without something to look forward to, he could not find a reason to get up.

How long had he spent in the Sky Below, anyway? A month? Closer to two?

In any case, he had beaten his previous record.

'Might as well get comfortable…'

Sunny closed his eyes and went back to sleep.

He spent the next few days doing nothing. Sometimes, Sunny would go outside and look at the sea of flames. Sometimes, he would remain in the Ebony Tower, staring at the walls. Only his incarnation that guarded Rain remained active, which was the sole reason he was not dying of boredom.

Eventually, however, he became fixated on a strange thought.

'...Can I cross the Hollow Mountains?'

The question seemed rhetorical, but it was not. Sunny did not dare delve into the hollow interior of the great mountain chain, where elemental darkness dwelled. But what about braving the mist shrouding it to traverse the exterior?

If the mist enveloping the jagged peaks was indeed pure nothingness, then anyone who entered it would become nothing. At least that was what one would think… they would think wrongly, though.

Sunny had undeniable proof that it was possible to survive in the mist, at least for some time. It was the fact that Saint Cormac had spent months exploring the Hollow Mountains on behalf of Clan Valor before being killed by Saint Tyris.

What had been his goal? Searching for a way to cross to the other side? Looking for an entrance into the Underworld, where Nether's stronghold was supposedly located? Or something else entirely, which Sunny could not even guess?

In any case, if Cormac could do it, then Sunny could, too.

'Should I try?'

He had no plans and no particular desires, except for the desire to be far away from everyone. Was there a more distant place than the unexplored vastness beyond the Hollow Mountains? There, Sunny would be truly and utterly alone, which was what he wanted.

The romance of the unknown...

His curiosity and wanderlust were calling him.

On the other side of the impregnable mountain chain… lay the Forgotten Shore.

It was now a desolate land of perpetual darkness. Most of the creatures that had populated the coral labyrinth were gone, annihilated by the Terror of the Crimson Spire. The dark sea was gone, as well, sealed by his own hand. Maybe a few abominations still survived, somewhere in the darkness… but he still wanted to visit that place one more time.

Sunny could retrace the steps of the journey he had made with Nephis and Cassie. He could make sure that the Soul Devourer was dead, and if not, fulfill his promise to burn the damned thing to the ground. He could return to the Dark City and sift through the scorched ruin of the Bright Castle, find the statue of the Slayer that

he had never seen, and sleep on his own bed in the ruined cathedral.

And that was not all.

Humans knew about the Forgotten Shore now. They also knew that the Nightmare Desert lay to the east, thanks to Nephis making the journey. However, no one had even learned what lay to the west and north of that cursed place.

Sunny could become the first human to ever set foot in those mysterious regions of the Dream Realm. Sure, no one would ever learn about his discoveries… but he would know. Doing it for himself was enough.

A subtle sense of excitement slowly took hold of his heart.

'No, no… I must have lost my mind.'

The Hollow Mountains were vast, and they were called a Death Zone for a reason. Who would want to enter a Death Zone of their own free will? One would have to be completely insane to do something like that!

He would never.

Shaking his head, Sunny summoned the Covetous Coffer and went about cooking himself a dinner. The dimensional storage was still full of monster meat, but there were plenty of ingredients from the waking world, as well. Feeling a bit down, Sunny decided to pamper himself a little.

Pulling out a printed cooking book from the alloy chest, he turned the pages absent-mindedly. Eventually, his attention was drawn to two recipes.

Sunny frowned.

"Huh."

Waffles? Or pancakes?

He wasn't very knowledgeable about these staple dishes, so deciding

which to make was a big problem.

In the end, he decided to make both.

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Sunny had abandoned the thought of crossing the Hollow Mountains.

Or, rather… he had tried to.

However, it was stuck in his mind like a catchy melody. The more time he spent idling in the Ebony Tower, the stronger the call of adventure became. He had come up with all kinds of reasons for why it was a terrible idea… and yet, it only grew more alluring.

'Can I do it or not?'

He probably could.

Sunny continued to hesitate, wasting time in indecision.

In the end, the decision was more or less made for him.

One day, he opened his eyes earlier than usual. His five shadows had all been resting on the floor, but now, they seemed alert. His shadow sense had long ago enveloped the island, so he could instantly feel the most minute changes in his surroundings.

Someone was moving on the highest floor of the Ebony Tower.

'The portal.'

Sunny rose from the cot noiselessly. He had been careful not to leave any traces of himself anywhere on the island, so all there was to do was place his pillow back in its original position.

The shadows wrapped themselves around his body, and a moment later, he dissolved into the darkness.

Soon enough, a delicate figure walked down the stairs, followed by a few more. It was Cassie and a few Fire Keepers… who seemed to have undergone the Ascension, already.

"Gather everything. We will be leaving shortly."

Sunny observed as the Fire Keepers went about dismantling their makeshift outpost. The cots were disassembled. The enchanted lanterns were gathered and prepared to be carried away. The modest kitchen was taken apart and stored in crates for transportation.

'What are they doing?'

Cassie looked a little bit disheveled, which was very unlike her usual tidy self. She observed the Fire Keepers silently, but at some point, a slight scowl appeared on her face.

The blind seer wandered the hall for a bit, seemingly without aim. Eventually, she stopped near the cot Sunny had slept on and touched the pillow briefly. He was about to grow tense, but at that point, one of the Fire Keepers called out to her:

"Cassie… are we really not going to be able to return here?"

Turning around, she lingered for a few moments, then answered with a sigh:

"I don't know. The Ivory Tower is about to leave the Chained Isles. The connection between the two portals might depend on distance, or it might not… in any case, it is better not to take the risk."

Hiding in the shadows, Sunny was momentarily stunned.

'Right… Nephis told Cassie to take the Ivory Tower to Bastion.'

He had forgotten all about it.

What would have happened if he stayed on the Ebony Island until the connection between the two portals was broken? Was he capable of ascending all the way to the Sky Above on his own?

Probably… after doing some weaving, at least.

But it would be such a pain.

'It seems I can't stay here anymore.'

It was so sudden.

But it was also… a relief.

Feeling strangely liberated, Sunny silently hid himself in Cassie's shadow and stayed with her until the outpost was completely disassembled. Then, he followed the blind seer back to the portal… on the way, Sunny said a silent goodbye to the statue of Storm God and threw one last glance at the map carved into the wall on the fifth level.

The Hollow Mountains were calling to him, and he had no reason to refuse the invitation anymore.

Once Cassie and the Fire Keepers returned to the Ivory Island, taking him with them, Sunny silently reached down with his senses and used Shadow Step to teleport to the distant land far below.

He stepped out of the shadows on the Southern Island, in the ruins of the ancient stronghold that had once belonged to Shadow Lord, and where he battled Nightmare many years ago.

In the sky above, the beautiful silhouette of the Ivory Island was drifting among clouds.

Sunny remained motionless for a while, looking up. Eventually, the flying island slowly moved, traveling south… crossing the chasm separating the Chained Isles from the rest of the Dream Realm, and leaving them behind.

It was time for him to go, as well.

He watched the Ivory Tower float away, and then turned around, facing north.

"...Goodbye."

Taking the first step, Sunny headed away from the ruined stronghold, never looking back.

Chapter-1754: I Hurt, Therefore I Am

Sunny remembered the first time he went all the way to the northern boundary of the Chained Isles vividly. Back then, it had taken Cassie and him around a month to reach the Night Temple from the Sanctuary of Noctis.

The Southern Island was further away from the Hollow Mountains than the Sanctuary — and yet, Sunny made the journey in under a week. Even then, it had only taken him that long because he was taking his sweet time.

He did not need to traverse the heavenly chains to get from one island to the other anymore — instead, he simply turned into a crow and flew north, landing from time to time to rest or take a look at something peculiar.

The Crushing was of no issue because he could escape it at any time with Shadow Step. The Nightmare Creatures of the Chained Isles were too weak to pose a serious threat to him, at least as long as he stayed alert. Most simply fled, frightened by his dark presence.

Strangely enough, Sunny felt that he was more at home in the Dream Realm than he was in the waking world. It was as though being a Transcendent finally made him suited to exist in this land of beauty and dread.

Soon, he saw a black line on the northern horizon. The line grew darker and taller as he ventured further north, until he finally could make out the jagged peaks of the Hollow Mountains.

The great mountain chain pierced the sky like the fangs of a giant dragon… at least that was how Sunny always perceived it before. Now, however, he knew that they were simply a scar left on the

surface of the world by the fall of a Void Creature that had been killed here at the dawn of time.

True darkness was born from the blood of that abyssal being, which had seeped into the broken earth.

Having beheld the draconian peaks, Sunny lowered his gaze and looked down.

The Northern Island had been destroyed in the battle between Sky Tide and Saint Cormac, so the chasm separating the Chained Isles from the Hollow Mountains was wider than before. Across the dark abyss of the Sky Below, the mountains rose steeply into the distant sky, white mist rolling down their slopes.

It flowed into the abyss like a wall of clouds, disappearing into the darkness.

Sunny exhaled slowly.

He was standing on the edge of an island, with the broken chain that had once connected it to the Northern Island rattling quietly far below. Far away, on the other side of the chasm, the great anchor chain that had once connected the Chained Isles to the Hollow Mountains was hidden by mist.

He was not alone.

Saint, Serpent, Nightmare, and Fiend were standing around him. Gloomy, creepy, haughty, naughty, and crazy shadows lay on the ground, as well. Only the happy shadow was missing, busy with its own mission.

Sunny exhaled slowly, then looked at his retinue.

He remained silent for a while, then said with a pale smile:

"The smart way of doing this would be to send one of you into the mist first. To see how it goes."

None of them showed any reaction… except for Fiend, who tried to hide behind Saint without drawing attention. Sadly, with his current

size, hiding behind Saint was not as effective as it had been before.

Sunny grinned.

"...Luckily for you, no one has ever accused me of being smart."

He had been complimented on his wit from time to time, but never in an accusatory tone. So, the statement was technically true.

Shaking his head, Sunny commanded the shadows to wrap themselves around his body. Then, he dismissed the Shadows and faced the abyssal chasm once more.

'What a bother…'

He had already tried to extend his shadow sense into the mist to breach the chasm with Shadow Step, but couldn't sense a single shadow on the other side. In fact, he couldn't sense anything. It was as if… nothing existed beyond the veil of mist.

Perhaps quite literally.

'Here we go.'

Sunny dissolved into the shadows, then emerged from them in the form of a crow. Flapping his wings, he cawed loudly and flew toward the Hollow Mountains.

He left the rattling of chains behind and glided on the winds above the bottomless abyss of the Sky Below. The white wall of flowing mist drew closer and closer, and as it did, Sunny's heart beat faster and faster.

'What if I really just… disappear?'

Would it be that bad? After all, he was all but erased from existence, already. Ending up being swallowed by nothing only seemed fitting.

'What the hell... of course, it's bad!'

Sunny was not going to disappear. He still wanted to live… in fact, he wanted to live more than ever before.

That was a strange quirk of his personality. The less reason there was for him to live, the more he wanted to survive, out of nothing but pure spite. Now that the world had truly and utterly rejected him, Sunny had to stay alive, no matter the cost.

Letting out another caw, Sunny plunged into the white mist.

Immediately, he felt… strange.

'Ah…'

What… what was that feeling?

Sunny couldn't quite describe it. However, it was debilitating enough to make him fall from the sky.

He crashed into the cold rock, rolling down the slope in a mess of limbs. The Crow Shell had collapsed, and he was back to his human body. The rocks bit into his skin painfully, but Sunny did not, and could not, pay it any attention.

'What… the hell… is this…'

It was… it was…. it was like a mind attack, but also completely different. At the same time, it was like a soul attack, but did not bring him any pain. It was also like a physical attack, but ir did not harm his body.

The best way Sunny could describe it was that, suddenly, he felt as if he was dreaming. Or rather, had been dreaming all along.

As if he was nothing but a fleeting dream, and all his life had been one long, meaningless nightmare.

And, therefore…

That none of it was real, and none of him was real either.

His sense of self was slowly dissolving under the numb indifference of that obvious realization, as if he was being pulled into a state of senselessness.

Sunny had never existed, and would never exist.

He…

He…

He did not exist.

As soon as he acknowledged that fact, his soul started to dim.

His body started to lose strength, as well.

His thoughts turned slower.

'That is right.'

Sunny smiled faintly.

'Come from nothing. Return to nothing.'

He could sense the mist flowing around him.

Through him.

Was his body turning transparent? If so... that was alright. That was how it should be.

Only…

'If I don't exist, if there is no me… then why does it hurt to have never existed so much?'

He had experienced being erased from existence once, already. That pain would have been meaningless if he had never existed, in the first place… so, the mere fact that it had hurt him so badly was a contradiction.

If he was nobody, then he would have felt nothing.

But he felt something, and therefore, he had to be somebody.

Pain bloomed in his heart like a flower.

And with it, his Transcendent soul ignited with the beautiful radiance of divine flame.

Tenacious blood ran through his body, filling it with strength.

His mind was aflame with desire.

Desire to exist.

'I hurt, therefore I am… wait, what? What kind of nonsense am I spouting?!'

Sunny groaned and concentrated all of his formidable mind on a single thought:

"I am!"

He was not nothing.

He was not nobody.

He was Sunless, formerly known — or rather, unknown — as Lost from Light. He was the Devil of Antarctica. He had been the Mad Prince once, but he was not anymore. He was even Lord Mongrel, even if he wished otherwise.

He was... Sunny.

It took all his focus to keep that thought from dissolving into the mist.

Once he managed to prove his own existence, the pressure of nothingness did not disappear, and the pull of non-existence did not lessen. Sunny had to keep concentrating on the fact that he had been, was, and would be without reprieve. If he let go of that fervent thought even for a few moments, both his soul and body would probably turn into flowing mist.

"Dam… damnation…"

Grimacing, he slowly rose from the cold stone and stared into the white nothingness that surrounded him with a grim expression.

'Ah. How insidious.'

This… was not going to be easy.

Mumbling quiet curses, Sunny dusted himself off and looked around.

He could not see anything, and the mist was dampening his senses. So, he didn't even know which direction he was supposed to go.

However, it wasn't hard to determine where the north was.

All he had to do was pay attention to the ground.

The ground under his feet was sloping in a certain direction… going down meant returning to the Chained Isles, going up meant venturing deeper into the Hollow Mountains.

He rubbed his face, sighed, and started climbing the slope.

Chapter-1755: Affirmation

Sunny walked up the rocky slope, surrounded by the flowing mist and a silence so absolute that it was almost deafening. He could not see very well, and even if he could, he wouldn't have been able to perceive much — his mind was so strained by the imperative need to continuously affirm his own existence that there wasn't much space left for other thoughts.

The mist could barely be permeated by his shadow sense, as well. His senses were impaired — not as much as they would have been in true darkness, but still severely.

Step. Step. Another step.

All sounds were muffled, and he could not hear his own footsteps. Because of that, Sunny had an eerie feeling that he was not moving at all.

'Damnation.'

This is going to be tiring.

He walked for a few hours, feeling more and more fatigued. Just a day before, he was flying across the Chained Isles, unrestrained and full of power… but now, simply taking a step felt like a burden.

That said, Sunny suspected that he would slowly… very slowly... grow accustomed to the pressure of existing within nothingness. He would have been long erased from existence if he had been a mere Sleeper… but a Transcendent soul was much more vast and potent than that of a Dormant being.

More importantly, it was fundamentally different from the souls of Sleepers, Awakened, and Masters. That was because a Saint's soul was connected to the world — so, to erase it, nothingness had to erase all

those connections as well.

That was why Sunny could struggle to keep existing in the mist.

In the next few days, he made little progress. Sunny did not dare to move brazenly here in the Hollow Mountains, especially before knowing what horrors lay hidden in the fog. So, he kept a low profile and simply walked, like a mundane human would.

The slopes under his feet turned steeper and steeper, and his surroundings became colder and colder. If these were mundane mountains, there would have already been snow covering the ground. But in this eerie place, the hidden expanse of black rock remained barren, with nothing but mist flowing across its surface.

Sunny judged that he would have to start climbing in earnest soon, scaling towering cliffs. Alternatively, he would have to circle around the steepest slopes to find easier paths.

There were no ruins hidden in the mist, no signs of living beings having ever been here. No sounds, no signs of danger. Nevertheless, Sunny tried to remain as alert as possible. He did not believe for a moment that there would be no abominations hiding in the fog — after all, if he could resist the pull of nothingness, so would the more powerful of the Nightmare Creatures.

And then there were the others… those who had been born from the mist.

As the days passed, he was slowly getting better at keeping himself from disappearing. It was still putting a constant strain on his mind, but at least Sunny did not sway like a drunk anymore while walking. He could pay more attention to his surroundings, as well, which was a relief.

He journeyed deeper into the mountains, having nothing to do but think.

Of course, what he thought about the most was nothing.

Sunny did not know how Cormac had managed to brave the insidious mist — perhaps the same way he was doing it, through sheer will, or

perhaps with the help of some artifact forged by the King of Swords.

However, he had come to believe that some people were better suited for the task than others.

And, surprisingly, Sunny was one such person.

There were several reasons why he could survive better in the white mist of the Hollow Mountains.

The first reason was very simple — it was his Transcendent Ability, Shadow Incarnation. One had to constantly affirm their existence if they wanted to resist the pull of nothingness, which, among other things, meant that they could not allow themselves to sleep. Surrendering to sleep, even for a few moments, would mean death... and even Saints had to rest from time to time.

Sunny, however, could delegate rest to his absent incarnation. Not only that, but his avatar could also don the Puppeteer's Shroud — he had transplanted the [Blessing of Spirit] enchantment of the Shroud of Graceless Dusk into the weave of that armor, which enhanced his ability to endure and recover from mental fatigue.

Cormac had not possessed such an ability, so his expeditions into the Hollow Mountains had never lasted more than a month or two. Sunny, however, could, in theory, stay here indefinitely thanks to his avatar.

The second reason was that he possessed a rich experience of trying to maintain his sense of self due to Shadow Dance. Sunny had spent years trying not to lose himself in the forms and shapes of the beings he shadowed, so resisting the dreadful pull of nothingness was, in a sense, nothing new to him.

It would have been much better if he still had a True Name, but, sadly, that was one of the two disadvantages weighing him down. The other disadvantage was that there were no strings of fate connecting him to other people, places, and events. Erasing someone like him, untethered from everything, was easier. After all, the vacuum left in his absence would be very small.

Luckily, there was the third reason — his greatest ally in the sea of nothingness. It had to do with the power and nature of his soul.

A powerful soul was harder to erase from existence than a weak one, and Sunny's soul was much more potent than that of almost any other Saint, let alone someone of a lesser Rank. Not only did he possess six cores instead of one, but each of them was also altered and bolstered by Soul Weave. He also carried four powerful creatures in his soul — Saint, Serpent, Nightmare, and Fiend.

The nature of his soul was no less important. In that regard, Sunny actually had two advantages. The first was one of his Attribute, the [Flame of Divinity] — for whatever reason, divinity seemed to repel nothingness, protecting him like a radiant shield. The second… was the fact that he was a shadow, and had the soul of a shadow.

Sunny did not know why, but he had come to believe that shadows were especially difficult to erase from existence. The Vile Thieving Bird's Spawn had failed to consume his soul because he possessed shadow essence instead of soul essence. Similarly, nothingness was having trouble swallowing him now.

He remembered the cohort's journey to the outer boundary of the Underworld, and the forlorn shadows he had found in the maze. They had belonged to the companions of the First Lord, but their owners were somehow gone, leaving only the orphaned shadows behind.

Sunny thought that he understood how that had happened better now.

They must have encountered a creature of nothingness somewhere there, in the dark maze.

But Sunny and the rest had been warned by Cassie to keep their eyes shut, and so, they somehow passed through the darkness unscathed.

Stopping for a moment, Sunny let out a sigh, leaned against the black rocks, and stared into the mist.

'Keep our eyes shut…'

Chapter-1756: Nothing Left

Once again, Sunny remembered the chilling encounter with the creature that had come to the Ashen Barrow from the mist. Just like in the dark maze on the precipice of the Underworld, he had survived that encounter by keeping his eyes shut on Cassie's advice.

The creature had been insidious, though, trying to trick them into opening their eyes. That was the first of the very few times Sunny had encountered an abomination capable of human speech…

But now, looking back on that fearful night, Sunny couldn't help but doubt if it had really spoken. He went over each and every word the creature had said.

His expression slowly froze.

Now that he thought about it… was it not the case? Every word it used was one that Nephis, Cassie, or Sunny had spoken themselves.

The mist being had stolen their words, just like it had stolen Cassie's voice. Like a twisted reflection.

Was that because the creatures of nothingness did not possess voices of their own? Or for some other, unfathomable reason?

In any case…

'How the hell did the Carapace Demon chase it away, back into the depths of the Dark Sea?'

The Nightmare Creatures populating the transient sea of the Forgotten Shore were all of the Corrupted Rank, at least. Soul Devourer's loyal thrall, however, was merely an Awakened Demon. Had it been because it served the tree, and was augmented by it in some way? Because the Soul Devourer attacked the invader alongside

its guardian?

Or simply because battling the mist creatures was different from battling other abominations?

Maybe the Carapace Demon had kept its eyes shut, as well.

'Don't I know another creature who makes me want to keep my eyes closed, though?'

Well, actually, he knew two.

The first one was Torment. But he was more interested in the second one… Mordret.

The self-proclaimed Prince of Nothing, who could enter a being's soul through the eyes.

That title of his… was it simply an ironic moniker Mordret had invented because of being abandoned by his family, or something far more meaningful?

After all, the connection between him and nothingness did not stop there. In the Second Nightmare, the original body he had been sent into belonged to a mysterious mist creature. A mist creature who had descended from the Hollow Mountains and consumed every living soul in the northern reaches of the Kingdom of Hope.

Mordret had undergone some sort of transformation in the Ebony Tower, as well, making him almost impossible to sense through divination. The Ebony Tower, which had belonged to Nether… the Prince of the Underworld, who was closely tied to the white mist and nothingness, wearing it like a mantle.

Was it all a series of coincidences, or did Mordret possess some connection to nothing?

'I just can't make sense of that guy.'

What was his Aspect? What was his Flaw? What had Asterion done to him, and why did he enter the First Nightmare as a child? What had happened to him in that Nightmare?

Mordret carried the lineage of War God… the Goddess of Life, as well as progress, technology, craft, and intellect. The patron deity of humanity. The core of his Aspect seemed to be connected to reflections and mirrors, which didn't strike Sunny like something having to do with warfare, and was only tangentially connected to technology and crafting.

Of course, Lineage and Aspect did not have to be directly connected. Sunny himself carried the lineage of Weaver, but possessed an Aspect tied to Shadow God. Nephis carried the lineage of Sun God, but her Aspect was not connected to any god at all, but rather to the mythical nephilim.

In any case, what did mirrors have to do with nothingness?

Sunny did not see a connection, but there had to be one.

'I'll ask the bastard the next time I see him. No... right. I won't see him ever again.'

It was a bit of a relief.

After catching his breath — metaphorically speaking — Sunny sighed and continued on his way. However, this time, he took additional precautions. He closed his eyes and moved forward relying on nothing but his dampened shadow sense, sticking to shadows where he could.

The nothingness was oppressive.

But, at the same time… it was strangely healing.

Sunny was tormented by fatelessness. He was in pain because nobody remembered him, but here, ironically, his very life depended on being able to at least remember himself — and do it fiercely.

If no one else could acknowledge his existence, he had to do it himself.

And the more Sunny affirmed his existence, the duller his pain became.

'What a perverse situation.'

Moving stealthily through the mist, Sunny smiled crookedly.

But then, he froze.

'...Crap.'

He had grown so accustomed to the desolate silence of the Hollow Mountains that the sudden change sent him into a panic.

The ground had just trembled under his feet.

Alarmed, he dashed to the nearest outcropping of rocks and dissolved into the shadows cast by the overhanging stones. Remaining absolutely still, Sunny observed the world somberly.

The ground was shaking at short intervals, the tremors growing more violent with each minute. The silence was finally broken by the sound of rocks rolling noisily down the slopes. It echoed in the mist, distorted strangely.

'What…'

It was then that it happened.

A twisted dark pillar descended from the sky and crashed into the mountain slope not far away from him. It remained motionless for a few moments, leaned, and then rose into the mist — only to fall down once more, dozens of meters away.

Further away, another pillar crashed into the stone. And then another, and another, and another...

Sunny suddenly felt very small.

'These are… legs.'

In the next moment, an indescribable sound rolled through the mist, disturbing its flow. Distorted, it was like a deafening bellow of a war horn, or a sorrowful wail of a gargantuan beast.

The wail was full of fear and agony.

A vast shadow covered the area where Sunny was hiding, and then, dark liquid poured from above. Enormous waterfalls of something that resembled blood fell down and splattered on the rocks, turning into mountain rivers.

Hidden in the shadows, Sunny observed the terrible scene in silence.

The mist flowed above the rivers of dark blood, and as he watched… the blood slowly became transparent, already turning into wisps of fog.

A few moments later, the foaming rivers were gone, and all that was left…

Was nothing.

The towering pillars left the range of his perception, and the vast shadow pressing Sunny down disappeared with them.

The enormous creature, whatever it was, had moved on.

About a minute later, something crashed into the ground in the distance, causing one last, violent tremor.

Sunny hesitated for a while, then emerged from the shadows.

He stood motionless for a while, looking in the direction of where the enormous creature had gone.

Eventually, he gritted his teeth and followed.

'What the hell am I doing?'

He wasn't sure why he wanted to find the place where the creature had fallen, but something was pushing him forward. Perhaps it was the need to know what kind of enemies he would face in this eerie place. Perhaps it was simple curiosity. Perhaps it was something akin to the call of the void, the morbid desire to jump into the beckoning abyss.

At some point, Sunny turned to a vertical slope and started climbing. The white mist was not uniform — it was thicker in some places and thinner in others. Usually, the closer to a peak one got, the further they would be able to see.

It took him some time to climb the tall cliff stealthily. Following along its edge, Sunny reached a narrow ledge and came into view of a vast mountain valley.

It was shrouded in mist, but he could still see the appalling shape of an immense, abhorrent creature that lay in the fog, its titanic body stretching as far as he could see.

Shifting his gaze, Sunny paled when he saw an ocean of vile darkness permeating the being's soul, spreading from seven tumorous growths.

'A… a Great Titan.'

His heart was suddenly cold.

Looking upon a Great Titan was already unnerving enough. What made Sunny truly tense, however… was the fact that the abomination's flesh was terribly torn and mutilated, as if it had barely escaped from a fearsome clash.

What could have mangled a Great Titan so badly?

The wounds were hideous and utterly dreadful, and yet, they did not seem grievous enough to kill a being such as this.

However…

They weakened it.

They weakened its body, they weakened its mind, they weakened its soul… and they weakened its will.

And that was much too dangerous in the Hollow Mountains.

Although the unfathomable abomination was still alive, the mist was already flowing over its endless shape.

Hiding in the shadows, stunned, Sunny remained motionless and watched…

As a Great Titan was devoured by nothingness, slowly dissolving into a milky fog.

Not long after, it was completely gone. It died just like that.

No, not even died.

The Titan was simply erased, as if it had never existed at all.

Chapter-1757: Hollow Mountains

Sunny had felt bold not too long ago. Transcendence had increased his power tremendously, and reuniting with Serpent added another fearsome Shadow to his dark legion. He had braved the dark depths of Earth's oceans, slaughtered his way across the Antarctic Center like a Grim Reaper, slain the Winter Beast, and crossed the Chained Isles as if he was taking a walk in the park.

His power had gotten to his head, and he had thought himself truly strong.

…The Hollow Mountains disabused him of that notion.

Wandering the endless expanse of flowing mist, lost among jagged peaks, Sunny was reminded of how weak and insignificant he was in the grand scheme of things.

Effie had once said that the Dream Realm was a dark paradise… but as far as Sunny was concerned, it seemed more like hell.

If the conquered regions of the Dream Realm were hell, however, the Hollow Mountains were a deeper and much more dreadful abyss. The horrors that dwelled here were beyond all reason, unfathomable and indescribable, possessing the power to reshape the world with the chilling malice of their alien wills.

Great abominations, and even Cursed ones… Sunny saw their grotesque shapes moving in the mist from time to time, making him shudder.

Sometimes, a vague silhouette of a vast creature would pass his hiding spot, wreathed in wisps of fog. Sometimes, an entire section of a mountain would come alive, sliding away to reveal itself as a

gargantuan tentacle that had been wrapped around the towering peak. Sometimes, he would hear eerie sounds echoing in the mist, and feel as though his very mind was being consumed by them.

If not for the Onyx Mantle, which granted him a high degree of resistance to soul and mind attacks, those eerie cries alone would have been enough to kill him.

This was a land of death, after all. Humans had named such regions Death Zones for a reason — there was no place for mortals here.

…And yet, Sunny was here.

He might have been humbled by the dread of the Hollow Mountains, but he was not deterred by it. Even if he was not powerful enough to face the creatures dwelling in the mist, he was strong and resourceful enough to survive them.

As time went on, he learned to resist the will-eroding pull of nothingness better. It still strained him, but pushing against the dissolution of his self had eventually become a habit. He moved stealthily and stayed out of sight, making sure not to attract the attention of the Great Nightmare Creatures, and retreated at the mere suspicion of a Cursed One being close by.

Of course, he was not always able to escape.

As months went by, Sunny failed to evade the attention of powerful abominations a few times. Navigating the mist was difficult, and his senses were impaired… so were theirs, but that simply meant that many things were up to luck.

And Sunny had no luck to speak of.

When he was forced to fight, the battles were chilling. The black rock shattered, and the mist boiled from the furious forces unleashed by the combatants — Sunny had to give it his all to simply survive, testing the absolute limits of his Transcendent power and using every ounce of cunning dwelling in his devious mind.

Sometimes, he killed the enemy. Sometimes, he repelled their assault and escaped.

Sometimes, he hurt them enough for their will to be shaken, and let the mist finish the job.

…It was strangely convenient. Unlike the Nightmare Creatures, Sunny never surrendered to nothingness — no matter how badly he was hurt, how terribly his flesh was mangled, and how much agony he was in, his will and desire to exist never wavered.

That was an advantage humans had over the abominable beings of Corruption, it seemed. The abominations had never had a strong sense of self, to begin with, while humans prized themselves for being highly individualistic.

Sunny had never thought that there would come a time when his only enemies would be Great Nightmare Creatures, but here it was.

The Hollow Mountains were a natural preserve for the most dreadful of beings. Only those whose will was strong enough to exist in nothingness could survive here, after all…

Sunny was one such being, as well, it seemed.

He had wandered the steep slopes of black rock for months, persistently searching for safer paths and seeking shelter in shallow caves when his body needed rest. Being surrounded by terrible enemies who were much more powerful than him and hiding from them like a tiny bug in order to survive… ah, it felt a little bit nostalgic.

Sunny felt as small and powerless as he had on the Forgotten Shore. But, at the same time, his mind was as clear as it had been there. He just had to survive, using all possible means — there was just life and death, with nothing in between.

And just like on the Forgotten Shore, the more he survived, the stronger he became.

Battling Great Nightmare Creature in the flowing mist was just as merciless of a crucible as the Crimson Labyrinth and the Dark City had been for him as a Sleeper. He was slowly coming into his own strength, learning how to wield the vast power of a Transcendent. He

also gained terrible experience of facing such creatures.

With every dreadful abomination that fell by his hand, Sunny learned how to kill the next one better. And with every abomination he managed to elude, he learned how to escape from the next one better. Fighting opponents stronger than himself... that was the best way to grow.

…Of course, it was not all battles here in the Hollow Mountains. In fact, Sunny spent most of his time hiding and creeping stealthily between the jagged peaks. He was tense and on edge most of the time, but sometimes, he was also very bored.

There were long stretches of time he had to spend holed up in some cave or hidden in the dark embrace of shadows, waiting for the danger to pass. Sunny entertained himself by working on the project he had started in the Tomb of Ariel — trying to turn the Covetous Coffer into an Echo.

He was making steady progress, slowly learning how to make that particular Memory into a vessel for the shadow of the Mordant Mimic. Now that Sunny had lost the assistance of the Nightmare Spell, he wasn't sure if he would even be able to make the conversion… but he still wanted to try, since he knew that he would not be getting any new Echoes for the same reason.

Fighting powerful Nightmare Creatures was more than exciting, but he needed some variety as far as entertainment was concerned. Weaving provided a nice change of pace.

Of course… Nightmare Creatures were not the only beings dwelling in the mist.

There were also the others.

Sunny had only encountered the creatures of nothingness after leaving the outskirts of the Hollow Mountains and venturing deeper into the vast expanse of the deadly region. His very first encounter had almost become his last.

Whispers of long-forgotten voices, echoes of long-extinguished

wails… they surrounded him from all sides, drifting in the mist. Sunny had his eyes tightly shut, hiding in the shadows and praying for the eerie being to move past without noticing him. Somehow, he knew that if he saw it, he would not survive.

Or at least his self would not survive — who knew, perhaps six lonely shadows would be left wandering the world in his wake.

Eventually, the whispers grew distant and disappeared.

The deeper into the mist Sunny went, the more of these creatures he encountered. He had never gazed at them, so he didn't even know what they looked like, or if they looked like anything at all. He could allow himself to fight the Nightmare Creatures, but every time he encountered a mist being, he either hid or escaped.

It was only that… after a while, Sunny started to doubt if they were even creatures at all. It almost felt as if the voices wandering the fog were strange phenomena, instead. As though the eerie remnants of things and beings erased by nothingness drifted in the mist, attracted to each other by the ancient vestiges of erased wills.

He had a particular suspicion, though…

'To be is to be perceived.'

There was a school of thought that claimed that things only existed if they were perceived. That which was not perceived did not exist, but since one could not perceive nothing, everything they did perceive had to be something.

In other words, nothing would become something by the mere act of being perceived.

Like a reflection, perhaps, which was only there when one stood in front of the mirror.

It was a bit of a strange philosophy, and one that depended on the existence of an omniscient God to make sense — a God who perceived all of existence, and therefore made it real.

The gods were dead, of course, and more than that, they had never

been omniscient. So, that disproved the whole notion… but Sunny still felt that there was a kernel of truth to it.

Perhaps things could exist without being perceived, and nothing would not become something even if it was witnessed.

But he felt that the beings of the mist would definitely become more real if they were witnessed. To behold them was the same as giving them power. Looking upon them would make nothing become something enough to come into contact with existence… and tear it apart.

At least that was what he thought.

For that reason, Sunny did not only close his eyes near the mist creatures, but also covered his ears and retracted his shadow sense, turning himself blind, deaf, and mute.

Being devoid of most senses in the middle of a Death Zone was its own kind of terror, but he simply gritted his teeth and endured.

Sunny did not know if what he was doing had any meaning… but the creatures of nothingness had never managed to consume him, so maybe he was doing something right.

Chapter-1758: Something Wicked This Way Comes

Even if Sunny found a tentative way to survive encounters with the creatures of the mist, and even if he was slowly learning how to survive in the battles against the Great Nightmare Creatures, claiming their lives one after another… even if he avoided the Cursed Ones with utmost caution… there was still one big problem he had to contend with.

The Hollow Mountains themselves.

The Forgotten Shore was a vast land, one that probably had been its own realm once upon a time. The Nightmare Desert was of the same size, if not larger. And yet, the mountain chain stretched from east to west like a great wall, bordering both of these regions, and a few others. It was simply enormous.

Worse than that, the jagged peaks were shrouded in thick mist, which made navigating them all but impossible. Sunny was mostly sure that he had not lost his understanding of where the north was… but after dozens of furious battles and narrow escapes, his certainty was not absolute.

Maybe he was hopelessly lost, or maybe the Hollow Mountains were simply too vast. In any case, his journey was taking longer than he had expected.

Much, much longer.

Out there beyond the mist, Rain's family had already left the waking world behind and settled in Ravenheart. Sunny's avatar had approached her and somehow talked his way into becoming her teacher.

But Sunny was still wandering the mist, hiding from the unspeakable horrors that dwelled within it, and clashing with them when there was no chance to escape.

At times, he doubted that anything except for the white mist had ever existed. He was so accustomed to the flowing fog and the black rocks, so used to the harsh life of the weakest being in the mountains, and so familiar with the strange nature of existing in the sea of nothingness that his past did not seem real.

Wasn't it ironic? The only thing that seemed to have existed was non-existence.

The warm and endearing life of his distant avatar seemed like a dream, instead.

'Funny.'

Beaten and battered, hurting all over, Sunny was slowly learning how to fight and function without the Nightmare Spell.

Tired of only working on turning the Covetous Coffer into an Echo, he tried to envision a Memory that would replace some of the rudimentary functions of the Spell — especially those having to do with presenting information in an easily digestible manner.

Such a Memory was not that hard to weave, but actually designing it required some creativity. After all, the source of all that information would not be the Nightmare Spell, but Sunny himself — therefore, he had to find a way to automatically convert things he knew or perceived into runes. That was an interesting challenge.

Apart from that, he was also trying to teach himself how to enter his Soul Sea. Some of the things he had learned with the help of the Nightmare Spell had remained with him, like muscle memory — the acts of traveling between realms and placing realm tethers, for example.

But some, like visiting the Soul Sea, were completely gone. So, he had to relearn them.

The ancient people of the Dream Realm had been able to enter their

Soul Seas long before the Nightmare Spell was created, so there was no reason that he couldn't do the same. In fact, there had probably never been a Transcendent who did not know the way into their Soul Sea, so Sunny felt a bit ashamed of himself.

It was just hard to find the way without a teacher.

Nevertheless, he eventually succeeded… even if it had taken him slightly more than a year.

After entering the Soul Sea, Sunny confirmed two things. The first thing was that the Memories he could not summon… were truly gone, instead of being simply unavailable. That gave him a sense of bitter melancholy.

The second thing he learned was that the formless shadow of the Vile Thieving Bird's Spawn was gone, as well — just as he had suspected. The loathsome creature had claimed its odious chick.

A year had already passed, and he was still in the Hollow Mountains. He had celebrated his twenty-second birthday in a tiny cave on the side of a misty mountain.

Sunny felt thankful to the Onyx Mantle and the Puppeteer's Shroud — if not for the fact that both of his armors could repair themselves, he would have been wearing rags.

He was also thankful to the Endless Spring — because of Cassie's gift, he was not only able to quench his thirst whenever he wanted, but also wash himself regularly. Otherwise, every creature in the region would have probably detected his stench.

He was also thankful to Bone Weave and his Transcendent teeth. Most of the provisions he had stored in the Covetous Coffer were long gone, so his diet consisted predominantly of the meat harvested from the Great Nightmare Creatures slain by him. It tasted heavenly, but chewing it often was something only Saints would be able to do.

A few months after gaining access to the Soul Sea, Sunny successfully turned the Covetous Coffer into a flawed Echo.

It was only an Echo in name, possessing the structure of one, but

lacking the main component — the semblance of autonomy. Nevertheless, that was fine. Sunny did not need the Coffer to do anything that a real Echo would be able to do, he just needed it to be the vessel for the shadow.

Once the faux Echo was turned into a Shadow, the autonomy would follow. It was just that it would be true autonomy, not the masterful imitation of one granted by the Spell.

It took him another month to figure out how to fuse the shadow of the Mordant Mimic with the Covetous Coffer. Strangely enough, Serpent was of great help in that regard — with its help, Sunny guided the dark flames of his soul to encompass both, and listened to his instincts from there.

Sadly, everything happened so fast that he failed to glean the secrets of the mysterious process. He still had no idea how exactly Shadows were made, just that his Aspect contained some sort of authority that allowed him to create them. Nevertheless, Sunny wasn't sure that he would be able to repeat the process just yet.

In any case, that was how the Marvelous Mimic was born.

Sunny had come up with the name himself, because that was how he felt after commanding his new Shadow to turn itself into a little hut.

Sleeping under an actual roof, away from the mist… wasn't that simply marvelous?!

His journey through the Hollow Mountains was still exhausting and harrowing, but at least it had become a little more comfortable.

…In the end, it took him around a year and a half to escape that misty hell.

One day, Sunny was limping down a slope — one of the hundreds, or maybe even thousands of the slopes he had climbed — with an emotionless expression on his pale face. Of course, no one could see his face, because it was covered by Weaver's Mask.

Hidden from view, his eyes were bleak and lifeless. His hair had grown longer than it had ever been, and was tied roughly by a piece

of string. The Puppeteer's Shroud was torn, tattered, and stained with blood — he had just escaped from a terrible fight, and had no time to dismiss the armor yet, giving it a chance to repair itself.

Four of his shadows were exploring the mist, surrounding him from all sides — far enough to serve as scouts, but close enough to escape back to him at the first hint of danger. Only gloomy remained glued to his feet.

Sunny dismissed Weaver's Mask and said in a flat voice:

"Well… anyway… that might be true, but mind your manners. I am a Saint, you know. Saint Sunless. Would it kill you to flatter me once in a while?"

The shadow stared at him sarcastically, then suddenly rose from the ground, turning into an avatar. The avatar, unlike the original body, was clad in the Onyx Mantle.

The avatar said:

"So what? I am Saint Sunless, too. I never lie."

Sunny stared at the avatar darkly.

"What a hateful face. Stop staring at me, bastard."

The avatar scowled.

"Who are you calling a bastard, you bastard? Don't you have any respect for our mother?!"

Sunny hissed through gritted teeth:

"Be a bit louder, why won't you?! Do you want some Cursed creature to hear you?"

The avatar stared at him gloomily for a while, then looked away.

They walked side by side for some time, keeping quiet.

Eventually, Sunny spat angrily:

"Waste of essence."

The avatar grinned.

"I might be a waste of essence, but you're the one wasting essence to have a conversation with yourself. Fool."

Sunny widened his eyes.

"What conversation? It's a quarrel. A quarrel with myself! Get your facts straight. Idiot."

The avatar did not answer immediately, instead turning his head this way and that.

Eventually, he asked:

"Say… don't you think that the mist has been strangely thin recently? I can almost see the next mountain."

Sunny scoffed.

"That's just how it is…"

But then, he fell silent.

Because at that moment, Sunny fully realized that he was right.

The mist was, indeed, too thin. It was thinner than ever before, even.

He lingered for a moment, then dismissed the avatar, wrapped the shadow around his body, and hurried his steps.

He recalled the scouting shadows, too, augmenting his body further.

'Can it be? No, really… can it?'

The world was slowly turning darker.

'It can!'

Sunny forced himself to remain calm and alert, moving forward as fast as he could while remaining cautious.

Half a day later, he climbed a tall peak and looked ahead, staggering slightly at the sight.

He did not even register at first what he was looking at. The only thing he cared about was that he could see anything, at all.

Out there in front of him, there was no mist.

Instead, there was a vast and desolate expanse of flat land. A land shrouded in eternal darkness, with a starless void looming above it as a black sky.

Sunny inhaled deeply.

'No way...'

After all these years, he had returned to the Forgotten Shore.

Chapter-1759: Return to the Forgotten Shore

The desolate expanse of the Forgotten Shore lay in front of Sunny, shrouded in darkness.

The black sky was vast and empty. There were no stars, no moon, and no sun populating the lightless abyss, making it seem boundless. Faced with the hollow eternity of its unfathomable grandeur, Sunny couldn't help but feel indescribably small.

Below the black sky, a barren wasteland stretched as far as the eye could see. The Forgotten Shore had changed, becoming almost unrecognizable… the Terror of the Spire, Nameless Sun, was dead, and the endless sea of crimson coral that had been born from her was gone as well, replaced by ashen dust.

The darkness shrouding the desolate expanse was absolute. But it was merely the absence of light, not the true darkness that dwelled in the abyss of the Underworld. Therefore, Sunny's gaze could pierce its veil without restraint.

The Forgotten Shore… had become a land of shadows.

His bloodless lips twisted into a pale smile.

"I'm back."

***

It took him a few more days to descend from the Hollow Mountains and leave the dark slopes behind, finally setting foot on the Forgotten Shore again.

Surrounded by the sea of ashen dust and absolute silence, Sunny

remained motionless for a while, gazing into the distance with a strange expression on his bruised face.

The lack of light, the lack of sound, the lack of life…

"How peaceful."

It was a land of death.

He walked a few steps forward, and then staggered, falling to his knees. His hands drowned in the dust, and his breathing had become labored, hoarse whistles escaping from his mouth each time his chest rose and fell.

"Argh… aaahh…"

Sunny was suffocating.

It was not for the lack of air, but simply because both his mind and body were in turmoil. He was having a strange semblance of a panic attack, caused by the fact that there was no mist around him anymore.

There was no nothingness, and therefore, Sunny didn't have to struggle to remain existing anymore. He had grown so accustomed to that constant necessity, though, that its lack was like a powerful shock. Everything around him was so solid and immutable, so tactile and palpable… so something.

Everything was something. Wasn't that bizarre?

As it turned out, it was possible to experience a panic attack from the sense of relief. That feeling was so powerful that it debilitated Sunny completely, making him unable to think, move, or control himself. He remained on his knees for a few moments, and then sprawled in the dust.

'It's so calm...'

Very soon, he curled into a ball… and peacefully fell asleep.

***

Sunny slept without dreams for several days. He was both surprised and concerned by how long his original body remained asleep, but judged that it deserved a little rest.

Or maybe a lot of it. Spending a year and a half in the Hollow Mountains was not for the faint of heart… in fact, it was pure madness. If Sunny had known how long and dreadful his journey would be, he would have never ventured into the mist.

Or maybe not. Maybe he would have still gone into the nothingness. After all, even though crossing the Hollow Mountains had been a nightmarish affair, it had also been… fun, in a perverse and morbid kind of way.

It was also quite fruitful, tempering his will and sharpening his skills.

Sunny was a Transcendent now, and so, his skills needed to become transcendent as well. In fact, he had been contemplating the concept of a transcendent battle art as of late…

In any case, his body needed to rest, so he let it sleep. However, sleeping in the dust was not too comfortable.

He manifested an avatar and summoned the Marvelous Mimic. Once the Shadow turned itself into a hut, the avatar carried his body inside and put it on the makeshift bed — which was nothing more than an elevated platform formed by the Mimic on his behalf.

Saint, Serpent, Fiend, and Nightmare guarded the hut, each augmented by one of the shadows. The avatar, meanwhile, made a fire and went about preparing some food.

By the time Sunny woke up, there was a real feast waiting for him on the table. He remained motionless for a while, then sighed and sat up, rubbing his eyes. The pillow and blanket he had manifested before slowly dissolved into shadows.

The avatar gestured to the food with a grin.

"Come eat. I have ten different types of monster meat for you to enjoy."

Sunny was quite hungry, so he didn't waste any time.

Taking the first bite, he lingered for a few moments, and then asked somberly:

"Have we run out of salt?"

The avatar shrugged.

"You know we did."

Sunny let out another sigh.

"What about coffee?"

The avatar looked at him with amusement.

"There's a bit left. Let's save it for a special occasion."

Sunny did not need to ask himself these questions, of course, because he already knew all the answers. But, still… it was nicer to eat while enjoying a friendly conversation, even if he was talking to himself.

His retinue was great in many regards, but none of them were the talkative sort… in fact, the only one of who had ever spoken was Fiend, but that guy was better off keeping his mouth shut.

Finishing his breakfast, Sunny mounted Nightmare, dismissed the rest of the Shadows, as well as the avatar, and headed north.

The darkness took them in its welcoming embrace, and the ashen dust rose into the air, disturbed by the adamantine hooves of the tenebrous stallion.

***

It was strange.

Sunny vividly remembered the long journey back to the Dark City that he and the members of the cohort had made after visiting the Hollow Mountains. Back then, it had been an endless battle for survival — the Crimson Labyrinth had been teeming with all kinds of

vile Nightmare Creatures, and all those creatures had wanted to taste their blood.

But now, the Nightmare Creatures were gone, annihilated by the merciless sun.

The Crimson Labyrinth was gone, too, its demise caused by the destruction of the sun.

The coral maze had withered in the absence of its source, and crumbled into dust. Now, there was no one to lunge at Sunny from the darkness. There was nothing but death and desolation around him.

Silence and peace.

He rode the Nightmare north at a mild pace, not in a hurry to reach his destination. Rocking gently in the saddle, Sunny sipped water from the Endless Spring and looked around, his gaze full of placid curiosity.

'I think I recognize that place… no, do I?'

It was hard to orient himself in the sea of dust. There were a few landmarks that Sunny would have recognized, but he entered the Forgotten Shore in a different spot from where the cohort had gone. His route was entirely different, and he could have been hundreds, or even thousands of kilometers away from the places that the cohort had visited.

Well, it did not matter. If Sunny wanted to, he could spend the rest of his life here. He would find what he was searching for eventually.

No, actually, that was not quite right.

Since there were very few Nightmare Creatures on the Forgotten Shore now, if any, his supplies would run out eventually. So, his time was limited after all.

Sunny's laughter rang in the tranquil silence.

"Gods. Never thought I'd have such a problem…"

There were not enough abominations around! Such a travesty.

Wasn't that ironic?

Sunny traveled on horseback for a few days, then turned into a crow and flew into the boundless black sky. Drifting on the winds, he soared above the sea of ashen dust and made his way north while observing the desolate land for any familiar landmarks.

No monster lunged at him from the dust, or from the black abyss above. This land, which had become synonymous with dread and danger in his mind, was now strangely peaceful.

It seemed safer than even the waking world, let alone other regions of the Dream Realm.

Sunny opened his beak and let out a few piercing caws, laughing at the irony.

'It would be funny... if it wasn't so sad.'

…After flying above the barren wasteland for a few more days, he found what he was looking for.

The ruins of the Crimson Spire.

Chapter-1760: Ruins of the Crimson Spire

The Crimson Spire, which had been a symbol of both oppression and salvation for the Sleepers of the Forgotten Shore, was no more. Sunny had witnessed the beginning of its destruction, all those years ago, but was sent away by Nephis before the cyclopean structure collapsed.

Looking at the mountain of shattered black stone that towered above the sea of dust like a titanic gravestone, he wondered how she had escaped the cataclysmic collapse. It must have been hard, to escape that disaster…

It must have been even harder still to survive the long journey across the desolate Forgotten Shore, traverse the Nightmare Desert, enter the Underworld, and conquer the Second Nightmare. He had always known how hard it would have been for a mere Sleeper... but only after spending close to two years in solitude did Sunny realize how taxing it must have been on Neph's mind.

Escaping the collapsing Spire had probably been the easiest of her ordeals.

...Sunny gazed upon the vast ruin from the sky, then plummeted down and turned into a human. Walking across the dust, he fell into a solemn mood.

Soon, something crunched under the boot of the Onyx Mantle. He hesitated for a moment, then kneeled and brushed the dust away.

Below it, a monstrous skull was revealed.

Sunny stared at it for a while, then rose and looked around. He could discern more bones on the ground around him, all covered by a thick

layer of dust.

A quiet sigh escaped from his lips.

'It's here…'

He was on the edges of the battlefield where the Dreamer Army had fought against the horde of Nightmare Creatures.

There, in the distance, stood the broken remains of the siege engines that Kai had commanded. Not too far away, Effie had held the line against the flood of abominations, her soldiers dying one by one, until nobody was left. Behind that place was the spot where the Dreamer Army had made its last stand, the rising water already reaching their knees.

Sunny knew exactly how many Sleepers had come to siege the Crimson Spire. He also knew how many of them had survived.

So, it wasn't difficult to calculate how many human skulls lay here, buried in the ashen dust.

He remained silent for a while, and then said quietly:

"...Your nightmare is over."

Sighing deeply, he continued on his way to the bridge that led to the island where the Spire had once stood.

The bridge itself had long collapsed, destroyed by the falling debris. Once upon a time, Sunny had used the Dark Wing and Saint's strength to breach the wide divide… today, however, he simply disappeared from the spot and appeared on the other side a moment later. All it took was a single step.

Clad in an onyx armor, with his raven-black hair dancing in the wind, Sunny walked across the rubble and then froze in place, a subtle expression of astonishment appearing on his alabaster face.

His eyes widened slightly.

'Well… this is a surprise.'

Out of there, in front of him… a stone colossus was kneeling on the ground, unmoving.

Sunny recognized him instantly. The weathered surface of the ancient stone, the small cracks and fissures where countless abominations had assaulted the giant since ancient time …

After wandering the Forgotten Shore for thousands of years, the statue of the Builder had finally come to a rest.

Of course, his head was still missing. The giant hammer that had once struck down the harrowing depth dweller lay in the rubble to the side, forgotten and abandoned. The colossus was still and motionless, its back turned to Sunny.

Inhaling deeply, he walked around the gargantuan statue and faced it.

For a while, there was only silence.

In front of the kneeling colossus, six stone heads lay in the rubble, staring blindly at the empty space where the gates of the Crimson Spire had once been. The Lord, the Priestess, the Hunter, the Slayer, the Knight, the Stranger...

The seventh head — the Builder's head — was held gently in the statue's hands.

The colossus did not show any sign of life, having found what he had been looking for all that time.

Sunny lingered for a bit, then shifted his gaze, looking within the stone giant. His mind was full of bright curiosity.

'What are you, really?'

After a while, a strange sound escaped from his lips.

"So that's how it is…"

The walking statue… was neither a living being nor a Nightmare Creature.

It had no soul.

Instead, seven Transcendent soul shards were hidden in its stone depths, connected by dimly glimmering essence channels.

…Soul shards, not cores.

The ancient colossus was an automaton… a great golem created by the Builder and brought to a semblance of life by sorcery. Sunny had no doubt that if he broke the statue apart, he would find a complicated weave of countless runes engraved into its hollow core and the expansive web of essence channels.

It was a crude creation, far less intricate than even the Echoes that the Spell weaved.

No wonder Saint had treated it with disdain.

She was a true living being, after all — first created from stone by the Demon of Choice, then brought back to life by a treacherous shadow. The wandering colossus, the Forsaken Knight of the ruined cathedral… they were no more than pale imitations. Their power might have been much greater than hers, but their nature was deeply and fundamentally inferior.

If Sunny was to guess, one of the seven heroes of the Forgotten Shore — the Stranger — must have been one of the Stone Saints, and had brought a small number of his soldiers with him to this dark land. The Builder must have been in awe of Nether's craftsmanship, and tried to recreate it clumsily.

The walking giant was the result.

By now, the seven soul shards placed in his stone body were almost entirely devoid of essence, shimmering dimly, one step away from being extinguished. Perhaps the colossus had been absorbing power from the artificial sun, and was left without a source of essence after the Crimson Terror was destroyed. Perhaps he had simply exhausted all his power and came to a natural end.

In any case, the headless statue would not be wandering the vast expanse of the Forgotten Shore ever again.

Sunny threw one last glance at it and turned away with a sigh.

'I'm glad you found what you were looking for.'

He walked away, then started climbing the rubble.

"Even the big guy is gone… ah, why does it make me feel sad? It's like… I barely recognize the place…"

The reason he had come to the ruins of the Crimson Spire was still there, though.

It was at the very heart of the mountains of crushed stone, at the bottom of a vast well. Sunny climbed down, being extremely careful not to fall — he did not trust the stability of the rubble and tested each foothold before lowering himself deeper into the darkness, and for a good reason.

At the bottom of the deep well… was a vast pool of black water. Its surface was perfectly still and flat, like that of a harrowing mirror made from pure darkness. Although the water was opaque and Sunny could see how far down it went, he felt as though it was unimaginably deep, reaching such depths that mere thought of light would be impossible there.

The Dark Sea.

As Sunny watched it in solemn silence, a subtle ripple spread across the surface of the imprisoned ocean of darkness. It was as though it was straining to spill over the edges of the pool and break free. However, the invisible powers that held it down were too mighty to overcome, even for this vast, boundless, inconceivable creature.

The seal he had activated still held, showing no sign of growing weaker.

Shifting his gaze, Sunny peered into the depths of the Dark Sea and let out a stifled chuckle.

It did not change.

All he could see was boundless, appalling darkness.

However, somewhere deep, deep below…

He seemed to have sensed the presence of seven abyssal nodes where the Corruption was even denser.

His suspicion had been right.

The Dark Sea of the Forgotten Shore was indeed a living being… a Great Titan.

Before, the mere thought of a Great Titan would have caused him to fall to his knees in terror, but after witnessing one dying miserably in the white mist, Sunny remained unmoved.

He even…

Felt a strange, daring compulsion to dive into the black waters.

Why not? He had bathed in them before. Back then, the Dark Sea paid him no attention… would it be different now that he was a Saint, possessing a Transcendent Soul that would be much more nourishing for a being such as this?

What would he find in the depths of the ancient sea of Corruption? What mysteries were hidden in the unfathomable black waters?

'Should I find out?'

The temptation was strong.

He reached toward the dark pool, tantalized by its lightless expanse.

But then, he stopped.

Sunny remained motionless for a while, struggling against the sense of dark wonder. Then, he slowly, laboriously, pulled his hand back.

'What the… hell am I doing?'

He wanted to dive into the Dark Sea. Back then, he was merely a Sleeper… a powerless, pathetic Dormant Beast. But now, he was a Transcendent Terror, and carried a cohort of fearsome Shadows in his

soul. Although his mind was telling him to be cautious, his heart recklessly believed that he could survive the depths of the Great Titan… maybe he would even be able to destroy it.

Why not? What would he lose if he actually died in that vast darkness? There was nothing to lose…

Only there was, now.

If he had reached the ruin of the Crimson Spire before promising to be Rain's teacher, Sunny might have risked it. But now, things were different. She might not have remembered him… but he remembered her.

He also remembered himself.

Shaking his head, Sunny took a step back.

"I am… such an idiot."

It didn't even matter if he could survive in the embrace of the Dark Sea. What mattered more was that the Great Titan had been sealed by his own hand — and none of the Nightmare Creatures that dwelled in the black water were able to escape that seal.

So, if Sunny did dive into the black pool, he wouldn't be able to escape it, either.

Wouldn't it be funny, to be imprisoned by the seal he himself had put in place?

Smiling darkly, Sunny looked at the still water and sighed.

"If I ever become powerful enough to break the seal… maybe then, we'll meet again."

The black pool rippled, as if acknowledging his promise.

…Suddenly unnerved, Sunny took another step back and silently dissolved into the shadows.

Chapter-1761: Silent Streets of the Dark City

In the past, it had taken the Dreamer Army many days of an arduous march to reach the Crimson Spire from the Dark City. Now, however, Sunny could traverse that distance in less than a minute.

He was not in a hurry to leave, though.

Leaving the towering mountain of rubble behind, he crossed the broken bridge and returned to the ashen wasteland. He remained motionless for a while, then sighed and leaned down to brush the dust off the old bones.

…In the end, it took him almost a week to find the remains of every Sleeper that had perished in the battle for the Crimson Spire. There were four hundred of them, after all, and he had to be careful not to damage the brittle bones. So, it took some time.

He placed them together on the ground, and then used the jagged slabs of black stone from the ruins of the gargantuan tower to construct a stone barrow above the mass grave.

It was a little fitting, to lay these young men and women to rest under the broken remains of the Crimson Spire, which they had laid down their lives to conquer.

Sunny also collected the remains of every Nightmare Creature that had fallen in the battle, and piled them onto each other to the side of the barrow. The mountain of hideous bones towered above the stone grave, dwarfing it entirely in size… a poignant testament to how fearsome the Dreamers of the Dark City had been, and how valiantly they had fought.

He stood in front of the barrow for some time, and then sighed.

"We were tough bastards, weren't we? You guys… rest easy now. The others are doing well. Most of them still follow Nephis, but they are Masters now. The remaining Handmaidens will Ascend before too long, as well — Seishan is taking care of them. Oh, Effie and Kai are already Saints.

There are a few independents like myself out there, too. We... we all escaped."

Sunny didn't know why he was saying that. His words rang hollow… he wasn't a big fan of speaking to the dead, to begin with. What was the point?

Shaking his head, he approached the barrow and carved a few runes into the surface of the black stone.

The runes read:

[Here lie those

Who extinguished the sun

Dreamers of the Dark City

Sleep well

Your nightmare is over.]

Stepping back from the slab of black stone with a heavy heart, Sunny remained silent for a while, then sighed and turned away.

Walking across the sea of ashen dust, he summoned Nightmare and jumped into the saddle.

His voice sounded rough when he urged the stallion forward and said:

"...Let's get out of here."

***

A young man with alabaster skin and raven-black hair rode through

the darkness on a tenebrous steed, his fearsome armor crafted from polished onyx. In front of him, a great wall of dark stone rose into the lightless sky, obscuring the world.

Sunny had reached the Dark City.

He hunched in the saddle, looking up at the towering wall. The city, which had been populated by dreadful abominations, was now peaceful and silent. He could not sense any movement on its ancient streets.

After lingering for a while, Sunny stepped through the shadows and appeared on top of the wall. Gazing down, he saw a familiar landscape.

In the distance, the twisted and misshapen ruins of the Bright Castle were covered in soot. The Sleepers had set flame to the ancient fortress before leaving, destroying that which had withstood the cruelty of time.

He could recognize many other landmarks, as well. The toppled lighthouse, the half-collapsed library where he had once learned the truth of the Forgotten Shore, the plaza where Saint and her siblings had once fallen, the ruined cathedral…

Even all these years later, Sunny remembered every ruined street of the Dark City where he had hunted. The places where he had ambushed abominations, the places where he had been ambushed by them. There were countless pieces of rubble here that had been wetted by his blood, and even more that he had painted with the blood of his enemies.

A Fallen Nightmare Creature had seemed like the end of the world back then.

Smiling wryly, Sunny took a step into nothingness and jumped down from the great wall of the Dark City. The wind whistled in his ears for a few seconds, and then, he landed on the stone rubble. The silence enveloping the ruins was momentarily broken by the thunderous boom of his landing.

The Terror of the Crimson Spire had annihilated most of the living beings on the Forgotten Shore to fuel her transformation into a Corrupted Titan. Everywhere the rays of the ruthless sun had reached, nothing but death remained.

But there were many dark places in the ancient city. The interiors of the ruined buildings, the catacombs, the lairs dug in the rubble… the sun could not reach there. More than that, the abominations populating the Dark City were much stronger than those in the Crimson Labyrinth. So, a few of them had to have survived the annihilation.

Sunny was calling them over, wishing to eradicate them all in one fell swoop.

…However, even after he had made so much noise, nothing moved in the ruins.

His shadow sense was enveloping the whole city, but Sunny could not feel any motion at all.

Puzzled, he brushed the dust off the Onyx Mantle and ventured into the maze of ruined streets.

Sunny spent the whole day exploring the Dark City. He wandered the ruins and reminisced about the past wistfully. Here, he had rescued Kai from the well… here, he had learned from Effie how to kill a Blood Fiend.

Here was the ditch where he had hidden himself after the Black Knight gutted him.

'How nostalgic.'

By the end of the day, Sunny knew why there were no Nightmare Creatures left in the Dark City.

There were a lot of hideous remains on the ruined streets… most of them showed no sign of having received a wound, since their souls had been annihilated by the Crimson Terror. But some bones had nicks and deep cracks on them, others were scorched by flame.

'...Nephis.'

She must have come here after escaping the Crimson Spire and hunted the remaining abominations down, one after another. To build another core and harvest their meat for the long journey ahead.

A faint smile twisted his lips.

'She's so thorough…'

With the mystery solved, he wandered the ruins some more and eventually made his way to the remains of the Bright Castle.

The ancient stronghold had collapsed, the white marble melted by the terrible heat of the white flames. He did not know why he wanted to see the scorched ruin… so many things had happened here, between the Castle's walls.

But now, it was all erased by the fire.

Just like him.

Chuckling, Sunny shook his head and wandered the remains of the outer settlement for a bit. He kicked stones and remembered the past, then stopped by the lodge where Nephis and Cassie had once lived. Now, it was empty and quiet. After visiting his old room, he left the outer settlement and descended back into the city.

Finally, Sunny reached the ruined cathedral.

He entered the majestic great hall, climbed over the toppled column that Saint had once dropped on the Black Knight, and gazed at the statue of the nameless goddess.

He studied her face for a while, then stepped through the shadows and appeared on the hidden balcony behind it. Soon, he entered a familiar chamber.

The living quarters of the young priestess were neat and tidy, just as he had left them.

The room was beautiful and spacious. The stone walls were engraved

with intricate patterns, creating an atmosphere of sanctity and elegance. The furniture was made out of pale polished wood, with several mismatched pieces that Sunny had scavenged from the Dark City once.

He was surrounded by a soothing darkness. The chamber had no windows, but there were light wells cunningly hidden here and there… the ingenious system of mirrors that was supposed to bathe the room in sunlight was long destroyed, though...

And so was the sun itself.

Sunny closed his eyes and inhaled deeply.

Then, he recalled the Onyx Mantle, walked over to the spacious bed, sprawled on it, and fell asleep with a satisfied smile.

Chapter-1762: Thus Spoke Weaver

Sleeping in his own bed felt really great.

Sunny had had many beds throughout the years. He had one in his temporary room at the Academy, one in the bedroom of his house, the luxurious sleeping pod he had purchased after becoming an Awakened, a flimsy cot in the Sanctuary of Noctis, and even the wide sleeping shelf at the back of the Rhino, among others.

But out of all of them, this bed of pale polished wood, which had once belonged to the priestess of the ruined cathedral, held a special place in his heart.

Perhaps because this dark chamber was the first place he had considered home, and this bed was the first he had considered his.

Even though the time Sunny had spent living alone in the Dark City was one of the bleakest pages of his life, he remembered it with a special fondness.

Waking up pleasantly refreshed, he smiled, yawned, and climbed out of the bed.

Looking around the spacious chamber, Sunny remembered his days here. Things had been so simple back then…

He walked around for a while, briefly touching various pieces of furniture, and then stopped in front of a bare wall. There, countless scratches had been left by the tip of the Prowling Thorn, counting the days he had spent here.

Below them, the word "Sunless" was carved in the stone with two runes.

A sad smile appeared on Sunny's face.

Back then, he had wanted to leave proof of him having lived, struggled, and suffered in the Dark City on this stone wall. A mark of his existence.

Who knew that the mark he had left would become meaningless one day? His own actions made it so that nobody could remember him, even if he scratched his name into the stone a thousand times.

Sunny chuckled, then outstretched a hand and used his nail to leave one more scratch on the wall.

He had spent another day here, after all.

Then, he looked around, studying the interior of the dark chamber.

The thought of leaving it all behind once again made him sad.

But then…

Did he really have to leave it?

Slowly, a dark grin twisted his lips.

'Why don't I take it all with me? What a great idea!'

He needed to decorate the Marvelous Mimic, anyway.

Summoning the Shadow, he commanded it to turn into an enormous wardrobe and opened its doors wide, paying no attention to the rows of terrifying fangs hidden behind them.

Inside was the cold darkness of the vast dimensional storage.

"Shall we start?"

Smiling happily, Sunny went about loading the beautiful furniture made of pale polished wood into the Mimic. The bed, the desk, the intricate lectern…

He didn't even spare the garbs and vestments of the young priestess, which Effie had once mocked him about. These beautiful clothes

were made from fine fabric and masterfully tailored… more than that, they had remained in pristine condition despite thousands of years of neglect. Sunny would be mad to leave behind something like that.

By the time he was done, the spacious chamber was entirely barren, as if robbed by an extremely greedy thief. The greedy thief in question, meanwhile, looked at the intricately engraved stone walls, feeling regretful that he couldn't take the engravings with him. Eventually, he sighed and shook his head.

Closing the doors of the Marvelous Mimic, he dismissed the Shadow and left the living quarters.

By the time Sunny returned to the great hall, the smile had disappeared from his face.

He glanced at the statue of the nameless goddess one more time.

The description of the Nameless Sun, the Memory Nephis had received after slaying the Terror of the Crimson Spire, surfaced in his mind.

[For a long time, the Nameless Sun suffered in solitude, longing for all the things that were lost. Only when she lost that longing, too, was the Crimson Terror of the Forgotten Shore finally born.]

…Wasn't he a bit like her?

Alone and forgotten, even his name erased from the world.

He was even a Terror, too.

If he survived long enough… would a day come when Sunny turned into a Nightmare Creature, as well? What was it that he had not lost yet that kept his soul from blooming with the flowers of Corruption?

As his gaze darkened, Sunny looked away from the statue and headed for the inner sanctum of the ruined cathedral.

Finding the hidden passage, he allowed it to take him to a winding staircase and descended underground. Deeper and deeper still, until

he reached a large chamber carved into the bedrock.

There, a massive door forged from the same metal that the armor of the Black Knight had been forged from stood open, and two strange torches burned on the wall.

Sunny hissed and shielded his eyes. After days spent in absolute darkness, the pale light of the ghostly torches seemed blinding.

Beyond the open door… was the solitary cell where he had found Weaver's Mask.

And the forbidden runes left on its floor by the corpse that had worn it.

Sunny had come to the Dark City to read these runes.

Taking a deep breath, Sunny steeled his heart and walked forward.

The first time around, he had left his shadows behind, concerned that the light of the strange torches would harm them. But now, he knew that the underground cell was designed to keep someone in, not prevent others from coming inside. The runic circle had long been broken, anyway, and the sorcery protecting this place did not function anymore.

Entering the cell, Sunny studied his surroundings for a few moments… not that there was a lot to study. There was only the broken runic circle, the dust that the mysterious corpse had turned into, and the words left on the floor.

Sunny smiled darkly, then turned his attention to the forbidden runes he had not been able to read before.

These ones were different from the script Nether had used, and much easier to translate.

However, when Sunny read them, his expression darkened.

'What?'

He didn't quite understand...

The runes read:

[Thus spoke Weaver

"They will open the Gates"

And they did

Calling forth doom and destruction upon us

Now, in the ruins

Gods lay dead

And the daemons have fallen

The Forgotten One comes

Wide awake

To consume them].

The rest were illegible.

Sunny shivered.

'No, wait…'

What did it mean? They had opened the Gates? Who had opened them, and which Gates?

Not… not the Gates of the Void, surely?

That was impossible. If the Gates had already been opened, and the Forgotten God had already escaped from the Void, wide awake, then there would have been no existence left. Everything would have been consumed by Corruption.

But it wasn't… yet. Which meant that he was still asleep, seeing nightmares.

And yet, the runes clearly stated that someone had indeed unleashed the God of Corruption. Not only that, but Weaver had even foretold

that they would.

'Gods lay dead, and the daemons have fallen…'

Was that the answer to the question that had been tormenting Sunny? The question of who had won the Doom War?

According to these runes…

No one had? Both sides had been annihilated?

How could that be?

Had it been mutual destruction, or had someone killed them all? If neither side had won, then who had?

Suddenly, a chill ran down Sunny's spine.

He looked down, at the familiar string of runes written in a different script from the rest of them.

"Hail Weaver, Demon of Fate. Firstborn of the Forgotten God."

He suddenly had an ominous feeling.

Everyone assumed that there had been two sides in the war between the gods and the daemons… but was that really true? After all, there had been one deity that had refused to participate, standing in opposition to both the gods and the daemons.

The Demon of Fate.

So, if both sides had been annihilated… then wouldn't it mean that there was only Weaver left?

Sunny suddenly remembered the description of Bone Weave…

[When children of the Forgotten God rebelled against the gods, Weaver was the only one to refuse the call of war. Despised and hunted by both sides, they disappeared. No one knew where Weaver went and what they did… until it was too late.]

Until it was too late.

Unnerved, Sunny took a deep breath.

'...What the hell did Weaver do?'

Chapter-1763: Sea of Dust

Sunny left the underground cell in a complicated mood. To be honest… he was a little rattled.

'Weaver said… that they would open the Gates.'

Who were the "they" Weaver had spoken about?

The gods? The daemons? Or someone else entirely?

There was one thing that made Sunny restless. It was the fact that no one knew who Weaver was, so the nebulous daemon was never referred to as "he" or "she". Instead, the Spell used the neutral "they" to describe the Demon of Fate.

So... had it been Weaver who unsealed the Void, perhaps?

That did not make a lot of sense, though, since the runes described something that the elusive daemon had said. So, it would have been "I will open the Gates", not "they will"... unless Weaver had had a habit of referring to themselves in the third person.

There was the issue of the runic language itself, as well, which did not necessarily follow the same pronoun conventions as the human language did. The runes written by the prisoner of the ruined cathedral did not hint that Weaver had been speaking about themselves.

But still, still…

'Until it was too late.'

What did the description of Bone Weave mean, exactly?

If Sunny knew one thing… it was that Weaver had been the most frightening of deities, despite not being the most powerful. He did

not trust the devious Demon of Fate one bit.

Shaking his head, he walked over to the stone stairs, but then halted and remained motionless for a while.

Walking back, he stopped in front of the cell once more.

Summoning the Marvelous Mimic, Sunny violently tore the massive steel door off its hinges and tossed it into the wardrobe's terrifying maw. Then, he pulled one of the torches from its slot and carried it away, seemingly unperturbed by the ghostly flame.

A person who had been tossed away by the world had to be practical.

Why leave good things behind?

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Sunny spent a few more days in the Dark City, exploring the ruins curiously. Before, he had been limited in where he could go and what he could see — there had been Nightmare Creatures everywhere, and his power had been woefully insufficient to walk around freely.

But now, Sunny was powerful enough to cleanse the entire Dark City in a matter of hours. Sadly, all the abominations he had not been able to hunt down were already dead, slain either by the Crimson Terror or Nephis.

Still, he could at least explore all the places he had wanted to visit. There wasn't much important information left to be found here, but there were plenty of things he could learn that would be only interesting to a researcher like him.

The rituals, the mundane details of everyday life, the culture… stuff like that. By the end of it, Sunny collected many pieces of information that would have made the Exploration Report on the Forgotten Shore more comprehensive. Sadly, all of them would have had to be placed in the "Not Related to Combat" addendum, which most Awakened never bothered to read.

"Barbarians…"

Finishing his business in the ruins, he left them behind. Next, Sunny started on the long tour of the remaining six statues of the heroes of the Forgotten Shore.

He visited the Priestess first, since she was just outside the walls of the city. Sunny climbed onto her hand and sat there for a while, remembering the day he had reached the Dark City with Nephis and Cassie.

He had been… barely seventeen back then, knowing nothing of the world. He had just learned that there was more to life than bitter survival.

Sunny watched the black sky for a while, feeling regret that the sun of the Forgotten Shore was gone for the first time. He would never see it rise from the palm of the Priestess again.

Eventually, he wrapped himself in shadows and jumped down, gliding on dark wings to the distant ground.

Next was the statue of the Hunter, where the cohort had once burned the nest of the Iron Spiders. Sunny visited the giant arch of white marble on top of which they had rested and played games on the way, as well as climbed to the bottom of the canyon from where the Builder's statue had emerged.

Strangely enough, that rest stop on the white arch etched itself in his memories most vividly. Sunny felt remorse for never taking the members of the cohort to a real beach… now, it was too late. He would never have such an opportunity again.

Were there even real beaches left in the waking world? There had to be. Rich folk loved their leisure.

After that, he circled the distant city from the west and reached the monument of the Lord. That one, he had seen while marching with the Dreamer Army to the Crimson Spire. Sunny did not have any particular memories about this statue, but it was still quite significant.

That was because, if he was correct, the First Lord of the Bright

Castle had once defeated a powerful abomination here, receiving the Dawn Shard as a reward. That Memory, altered by Sunny, was still one of the most powerful tools in Neph's arsenal.

It was the very reason why they had managed to escape the Forgotten Shore… a piece of precious inheritance they received from those who had fought against this cursed place before them.

Sunny bowed to the statue of the Lord and continued on his journey

After spending some time exploring the vicinity of the stone colossus, Sunny moved on and found the statue of the Slayer some days later. This one, he had never seen — Nephis, Cassie, and Effie had formed an expedition to acquire a Shard Memory here while he was living alone in the Dark City.

'What a pity.'

Sunny felt a bit regretful about not participating in that expedition. As a shadow user, he felt a special affinity for the Slayer, who had been a stealthy assassin. Her stiletto had served Sunny well before being destroyed when he lost the connection to the Nightmare Spell. It was thanks to its ghostly blade that he had defeated Harus, the monstrous servant of the Bright Lord.

Funnily enough, this place was also where Cassie had earned the Quiet Dancer. Sunny had never learned what kind of bizarre Nightmare Creature could leave such a strange Echo behind… was it really a sentient rapier? If so, the battle must have been quite a tough one.

After exploring the vicinity of the statue, Sunny had indeed found countless broken blades buried in the dust. He could imagine the monument to the Slayer being surrounded by a vast sword grave…

By then, there were only two statues left on his list.

The unfinished statue of the Stranger was far to the south, on the precipice of the Underworld. Sunny hesitated for a while, but eventually decided to skip that one.

He did not want to go anywhere near the Hollow Mountains anytime

soon — or, preferably, ever.

That only left the statue of the Knight.

…Which, ironically, was where he had spent his first night on the Forgotten Shore.

Smiling faintly, Sunny summoned Nightmare and sent the dark destrier over the edge of the colossal crater.

He had crossed the crater on a makeshift boat made from demon bones the last time around. This time, the Dark Sea was gone, and the terrible wound left on the Forgotten Shore by the fall of the radiant being could be traversed on foot.

Sunny was curious to see what was hidden at its bottom, so he took his time exploring it at a leisurely pace.

He had found many hideous bones, but nothing that ignited his interest. Closer to the center of the crater, the ground had turned into black glass, and at its very heart, a round hole led into the depths of the earth. That must have been where the Dark Sea had come from at night, and where it had retreated to at dawn.

He stared into the darkness for a while.

'There must be several cavernous hollows below the Forgotten Shore, right? All that water had to go somewhere. Unless it spilled directly into some other hellish realm.'

If there were such a hollow, the entrance to one of them would be right in front of him. And with the Dark Sea gone, it would be empty. The idea of climbing down and spending a few months exploring the underground caverns seemed rather attractive… what kind of derelicts would he find there?

But eventually, Sunny decided against it.

He was sure that the great cavern, if it truly existed… would be incredibly dirty.

Plus, he had already been wandering the Forgotten Shore for a while.

Visiting the statues was taking longer than Sunny had expected, mostly because he was taking his sweet time and exploring many interesting places on the way.

Now that the labyrinth of crimson coral was gone, many things had been revealed from beneath it. Old ruins, ancient bones… all too damaged to provide him with any useful knowledge, but still fascinating.

In any case, a lot of time had passed. His birthday was… when was it?

Sunny counted the months and realized that it was almost upon him. He had celebrated the previous one sometime during the hellish track over the Hollow Mountains, so he did not want to celebrate another one in a musty cave.

And… he had an appointment.

Looking east, Sunny smiled darkly.

There was a reason he had carried a creepy torch with him all the way from the Dark City…

He had a promise to keep, and a debt to repay.

Chapter-1764: Never Be Afraid Again

A long time ago… Sunny had made a promise to himself. A promise to come back and destroy the Soul Devouring Tree one day.

Now, many years later, he was here to fulfill that promise.

He had been descending into the colossal crater for a while, but now that its heart was behind him, the ground was slowly starting to slope upward. Sunny rode Nightmare with a cold expression on his face, holding the ghostly torch in his hand.

The light of the eerie flame reflected from the polished surface of his armor and danced wildly in his onyx eyes.

It took some time to traverse the crater, but eventually, Sunny saw it.

The branches of a great tree covering the black sky.

A faint smile appeared on his lips.

'It lives.'

He had a feeling that it would.

Sunny... had changed greatly since leaving the Ashen Barrow.

The Soul Devourer had changed, as well.

The insidious fiend had already been enormous back then, but now, it had grown even taller, reaching into the black sky with its obsidian branches.

This tree towered above the sea of ashen dust like a majestic mountain. Its bark was as black as the lightless sky, while its leaves

were as red as blood… of course, Sunny could not really see color in the darkness. But he remembered their crimson splendor vividly.

The crimson crown of the magnificent tree used to cover the Ashen Barrow in its shade, but it was much richer and more expansive now, reaching far into the crater.

'That thing… has evolved.'

Sunny sighed.

It was understandable. Since the Soul Devourer had managed to survive the rays of the annihilating sun, it would have been left with no competitor on the Forgotten Shore. The Crimson Terror was gone, and so was the Dark Sea. The other powerful abominations, like the Lord of the Dead, had been slain by the Sleepers of the Dark City.

The insidious fiend growing on the Ashen Barrow would have used the vacuum to enhance its power.

Sunny shifted his gaze, looking beneath the obsidian bark.

Then, a sad chuckle escaped from his lips.

'A Fallen Terror…'

He was more or less sure that the Soul Devourer had been an Awakened Terror before. It seemed to have risen to a higher Rank… or rather, fell to a lower one? Sunny wasn't sure what the correct wording would be for a Nightmare Creature.

He did feel a certain sense of… disappointment, though.

He had been so terrified of that thing once. But now, it seemed so weak, and insignificant.

Dismissing Nightmare, Sunny landed on the ground, then walked up the slope of the crater. The ghostly light of the torch illuminated his way.

From the Ashen Barrow, he must have looked like a small mote of light in the ocean of darkness… drawing closer and closer, growing

brighter, and more chilling.

Sunny might have been illuminated by the pale flame, but his presence drowned the area in deathly cold. Outside the small circle of light, the absolute darkness seemed to become even deeper, darker, and more impenetrable.

Inescapable.

He heard the leaves of the magnificent tree rustle in the wind, their murmur seemingly anxious.

It was as though the rustling leaves were saying:

"Stay away! Don't come closer!"

Untouched by their alarm, Sunny stepped through the shadows and appeared on the Ashen Barrow.

Instantly, he felt an insidious influence trying to subtly twist his mind.

The tree was beautiful… the tree was generous… the tree was kind.

It was weak and benevolent, and its fruits were sweet.

'Huh…'

The fruits of the Soul Tree were indeed sweet. More importantly, they were quite useful… each contained a shadow fragment for Sunny to consume, after all. Best of all, the ancient fiend could grow them indefinitely.

Perhaps he should collect the fruits and keep the Soul Tree intact. Otherwise, there would never be another harvest…

Sunny smiled subtly and shook off the mental hex. It was too easy to do.

He had been a mere Sleeper the last time. But now, he was a Transcendent Terror. The Onyx Mantle was augmented by five shadows, and the measure of protection against mental attack it

provided him with could not even be compared to that of the Puppeteer's Shroud.

Resisting the manipulation of the Soul Devourer was quite trivial.

Its attempts to save itself… were a bit pitiful, really.

As soon as Sunny shrugged off the hex, the leaves rustled again, this time full of panic.

He sensed movement all around him.

Hideous figures rose from the ash… one, two, three… a hundred. Nightmare Creatures — new thralls to replace Sunny, Nephis, and Cassie, who in turn had replaced the Carapace Demon.

The Soul Devourer needed someone to protect it. The abominable tree must have worked hard, luring so many of the Nightmare Creatures that had survived the annihilating sun under its branches. Sunny would not have been surprised if these were all of them, really — every single creature that had avoided being consumed by the Crimson Terror, either through strength or by luck.

Nephis must have avoided this place because she had no means of protecting herself against the hex back then.

But what could all these abominations do to Sunny? Most of them had come from the coral labyrinth, and were therefore merely Awakened. There were a few Fallen creatures among them, but none of a high enough Class.

This time, it was his turn to be the horror.

This time, it was Sunny who was terrifying, inevitable, and full of murderous frenzy.

…The shadows stirred, and a hundred inky-black hands rose from the darkness. They grabbed onto the thralls, onyx claws sinking into their flesh. The next moment, the air was filled with the smell of blood. The massacre was harrowing and thorough, the silence broken by howls of agony and the revolting sound of flesh being torn apart.

Sunny walked through the mayhem calmly, not even sparing the dying abominations a glance.

Soon, he reached the trunk of the Soul Devourer.

The leaves were rustling, and the branches were swaying, their sound full of desperate fear.

He placed one hand on the obsidian bark and closed his eyes for a moment.

Then, Sunny poured his essence into the eerie torch. Opening his eyes, Sunny sighed… and set the magnificent tree aflame.

'You really chose the wrong person to enthrall...'

Then, he walked back to watch it burn.

The view was breathtaking.

Bright flames were climbing the towering trunk. The obsidian bark cracked, blooming with smoldering embers. Soon, the fire reached the leaves and exploded, spreading across the swaying crown of the Soul Devourer with tremendous speed.

When that happened, the darkness shrouding the Forgotten Shore was dispelled by the colossal ball of flame burning above it.

There was a cacophony of sounds. The roaring of the fire, the hiss of leaves being turned to ash, the cracking of dying wood. All of them fused into a chilling litany of pain, as if ten thousand souls were shrieking at the sky in agony.

It was… incredibly disturbing.

Sunny almost felt as if he was really hearing the ancient tree scream.

…It screamed for a long, long time.

The Soul Devourer was huge, so it took a while for it to burn down. The beautiful crimson leaves had turned to ash. The branches did, too, falling down in a whirlwind of sparks. The delectable, juicy fruits

were ruthlessly incinerated.

The trunk had taken a few days to die, but it eventually turned into a scorched, broken, hollow husk.

But it was only when the roots died that Sunny felt… nothing.

He didn't feel anything at all. He was of a higher Rank than the Soul Devourer now, and so, killing the insidious fiend did not even give him a single shadow fragment.

A few days later, Sunny was still sitting on the ground, looking at the smoldering remains of the great tree. He could feel that the creature was dead.

He thought that exacting his revenge on the Soul Devourer would bring him joy, but it didn't. If anything, Sunny felt… sad.

Such a death was... almost humiliating. It was unworthy of the creature that had haunted his nightmares for so long. He never wanted to humiliate an enemy that had earned his respect.

'When had I become so strong?'

He wasn't sure.

He wasn't that strong, either… but he did outpace most of the things in two worlds, as far as the acquisition of power was concerned.

Finally, Sunny stood up, summoned the Endless Spring, and washed the ash off his face.

The Soul Devourer was no more, and so...

'That is done. Now what?'

There. He had kept his promise.

Somewhere in Ravenheart, the sun was rising.

Which meant that Sunny was twenty-four now.

It was his birthday.

Sunny stared at the ghostly torch, which looked like it was on its last leg.

With a sigh, he walked around and collected a few pieces of charred wood. Then, he used the last of the eerie flame to make a fire.

Summoning the Marvelous Mimic, he pulled an alloy pot from its maw, as well as a tin can. The tin can contained his last spoonful of coffee powder.

Pouring the coffee into the pot, he filled it with water from the Endless Spring and placed it on the fire. A few moments later, a delicious smell spread in the air.

Sunny summoned the Shadow Chair, sat on it, and waited for the coffee to be ready. Then, he brought the pot to his face and inhaled the fragrant aroma.

"Ah…"

He remained silent for a while, and then smiled.

"Happy birthday to me."

Relaxing in an opulent chair that stood on top of a tall hill, surrounded by boundless darkness, Sunny sipped his coffee and enjoyed the view of fiery sparks dancing in the boundless black sky.

Chapter-1765: The Three of Them

The last memory Cassie saw was of the mad Saint climbing the statue of the Knight. She knew that he could have reached the top in one step, or turned into a crow to fly there — but, for some reason, the Lord of Shadow chose to climb the great height of the beheaded colossus like a mundane human, one handhold at a time.

In the end, he sprawled on the severed neck of the statue and stared at the black sky with a detached expression on his pale, handsome face.

That was where the memory ended, this time.

It was… almost too much for her to handle, making Cassie feel dizzy.

Reading someone's memories wasn't like reading a book or watching a video. She perceived things the way people remembered them — a chaotic mixture of images, sounds, smells, sensations, thoughts, and emotions. More than that, memories were often unreliable, and tended to twist the truth a lot.

There was no solid concept of time in the memories of most people, either. It was warped and twisted in accordance with how significant the event had been for them… or sometimes for no reason at all. A single minute could span an eternity, while entire years could leave close to no trace in a person's memory.

Usually, if Cassie wanted to uncover the truth, she had to gently... or not so gently... lead the man or woman looking into her eyes toward it. Very few people were truly in control of their memories, after all, so she had to guide them patiently. Often, they themselves were surprised to remember the details of certain events in their lives.

It had taken her a long time to teach herself how to navigate human memories. Eventually, though, Cassie had become a master of perceiving them.

But her hands were tied with the Lord of Shadows, because he was the one choosing what to show her.

His memory was incredibly sharp, but the way he perceived the world and remembered things was entirely too strange. On top of that, Cassie's own memory was incapable of retaining many of the things he remembered feeling, witnessing, or thinking about.

It was a proper mess.

But, still…

She managed to learn a lot from what he had shown her today.

Cassie looked at the Lord of Shadow with a complicated expression.

At first, he had shown her the Ivory Island. Knowing that he had been anchored there as a Master was already a precious piece of knowledge. She knew that he had not been a Fire Keeper from his service in the First Evacuation Army, so combining these two facts sent Cassie's mind into overdrive, countless theories spawning at it each moment.

What had been his connection to her and Nephis?

Soon, however, she couldn't help but pause as a cold shiver ran down her spine.

That was because she saw herself in his memories. The mysterious man had been so close… he could have reached out of the shadows and put his hand on her shoulder.

…Or drive a knife through her heart.

And she had not sensed anything.

That was both an eerie and frightening thing to learn.

'He was right there, in my shadow…'

She paled.

The Lord of Shadows had come to the Ebony Tower to study the runes left behind by the Demon of Choice. Cassie had read them, as well.

Very few people in the world were capable of knowing the truth of what was written on the walls of the Ebony Tower — few enough that they could be counted on one hand, perhaps. And the Lord of Shadows, it seemed, was one of them.

Shadow God was the God of Mysteries as well, after all. So, in a sense, it was only fitting for the Saint of Shadow to be privy to the forbidden knowledge about the Forgotten God.

Had Cassie herself taught him the truth? Or…

Was she the one who had been taught by him?

The memories that followed were like a feverish nightmare. The mists of the Hollow Mountains… was hard to pierce, even with her power. The long months the Lord of Shadow had spent challenging the impregnable mountain chain were like a blur — not only because he didn't concentrate on these memories, but also because he had worn that strange mask of his for most of the journey.

As long as the mask — one resembling those worn by the priests of the Nightmare Spell — was summoned, Cassie could not see anything in the forgotten man's memories.

But it was while watching these memories that she finally noticed that there was something strange about the Lord of Shadows. The inconsistencies had piled up until Cassie realized in shock…

'He is not a carrier of the Nightmare Spell.'

She was rattled.

How could that be? Something like that was impossible… for a human of the waking world, at least.

And yet, she couldn't deny it.

There was no voice of the Spell in the memories of the Lord of Shadows. No shimmering runes, no new Memories and Echoes. There were other clues, as well, but the most undeniable of them was the fact that he had spent close to a year learning how to enter his Soul Sea.

All carriers of the Spell could do it from before becoming an Awakened. And yet, one of the most powerful Transcendents in the world had not been able to.

Her eyes widened when the realization hit her.

Cassie lingered for a while, then looked at the Shadow Saint with a mournful expression.

'...Is it because he has been forgotten by the Spell, as well?'

How lonely and painful would it be, to be erased completely from the world?

She didn't need to guess. After all… she could experience his anguish personally, by looking at his memories.

Cassie's lips quivered.

No wonder he had been in such a disturbed state back then… was still?

Eventually, she was distracted from her thoughts by a stunning sight.

Her heartbeat suddenly turned erratic.

Cassie took a shallow breath.

'The... the Forgotten Shore…'

Indeed. The madman had actually crossed the Hollow Mountains — something that most humans considered utterly impossible.

And on the other side, a forlorn land lay shrouded in darkness, both

familiar and unfamiliar.

There was a storm of emotions raging in Cassie's heart. But, more importantly… she focused her mind completely on these dark memories, knowing that they would hold the key to the secret of where the Lord of Shadows had come from, and how closely tied he was to her and Nephis.

'Outer Settlement hunter? One of Gunlaug's lieutenants? Maybe… maybe even a Sleeper from the same year as us and Caster?'

She peered into his memories tensely, fighting against the inescapable forgetfulness as hard as she could.

Cassie shivered when he saw the ruins of the Crimson Spire.

She cried when the Lord of Shadows built a grave for the fallen of the Dreamer Army.

She smiled sadly when he explored the molten ruins of the Bright Castle.

She was curious to see the runes for "Sunless" carved into the wall of the ruined cathedral.

'Is that actually his real name?'

Whose name? What had she been thinking about?

She was shocked when he descended into the secret cell under the cathedral and read the ominous words written on its floor.

'Weaver…'

When the Lord of Shadows started his tour of the giant statues, Cassie was finally illuminated.

'That arch… he was actually with us during the expedition to reclaim the Dawn Shard!'

So their connection had been that deep…

But it was only at the very end that Cassie's eyes widened, and she gasped in shock.

The memory of the Soul Devouring Tree burning was incredibly vivid.

Her entire body trembled.

'From... the beginning… he was with us from the very beginning...'

The Lord of Shadows was not a hunter from the outer settlement. He wasn't from the Bright Castle, either. He wasn't even just a Sleeper from the same year as them.

He was someone who had accompanied Cassie and Nephis from their very first steps on the Forgotten Shore.

The two of them… had been the three of them, all along.

It was just that they had forgotten.

Suddenly, Cassie felt a sharp pain pierce her heart.

She felt as though… as though something so precious that it couldn't be described with words had been taken from her.

And with that, Cassie finally closed her eyes, breaking the contact between her and the Lord of Shadows… with Sunless.

Sunny.

There were so many details in the avalanche of memories he had shown her, so many hints and clues… it would take her weeks to slowly digest and contemplate all of them, then build her knowledge based on the new understanding.

But right now, Cassie did not care to do so, and was incapable of doing so either.

All she cared about…

Was the feeling of loss, the bittersweet emptiness, and the faint hope

of finding what they had lost once again.

Chapter-1766: Busy Body

Sunny returned to the Brilliant Emporium as the sun was rising above the eastern horizon. If someone had seen him coming back home at the break of dawn, they would have probably assumed that he had spent the night elsewhere… and with someone else, engaging in revelry.

Of course, being mistaken for a philanderer would have been the least of his problems — many people already considered him a lecher, anyway. It was better to be seen as a profligate than as someone who had a habit of sneaking into the forbidden parts of the royal castle at night.

'Now, wait… why does it sound so wrong?'

In any case, his goodbyes with Cassie had felt a little hurried. She had seemed to be a little dazed and a little rattled, acting strangely around him… well, it was not surprising. Sunny doubted that she had expected him to dump two years worth of memories into her head in the span of a few hours.

But he had no other choice… initially, Sunny had wanted to share his memories with Cassie little by little. But the war was approaching faster than he had expected, and so, he needed her to trust him sooner.

Cassie was smart. With what he had shown her this time, she would be able to figure out many things. Most importantly, she would understand that he had been a companion to her and Nephis for a very, very long time.

Even if their relationship had been turbulent and rocky for most of that time...

Knowing that, she would lower her guard around him more. She

would also advise Nephis to trust him better.

Well, and…

The things Sunny, as the humble shopkeeper, might do in the future would not look as outrageous. Which wasn't to say that he was planning on doing something outrageous, of course! But he had also not planned on participating in scandalous duels and being publicly embraced by Nephis because of a candy wrapper, so…

Things just sort of happened when Sunny was around her. He could put a leash on his emotions and control himself better, but… he didn't want to.

'Ah, so many things to do…'

Entering the Brilliant Emporium, Sunny yawned, stumbled sleepily to his bed — the very same bed he had taken from the hidden chamber of the ruined cathedral — fell on it, and closed his eyes blissfully.

At the same time, his avatar in the basement of the Marvelous Mimic looked up in disbelief.

"No way."

They had so many things to do, and the original body decided to just go to sleep?!

Sunny couldn't believe himself.

Shaking his head, he sighed and continued pouring over his notes.

There was indeed a lot to do.

He was preparing Memories for Rain, developing a design of the soul sword for Nephis… oh, and by the way, today was the day they were supposed to go on an outing to feed the rumors.

As if he was not suffering enough from the rumors already…

Despite that, Sunny was looking forward to their date. Even if it was a fake one.

Before that, however…

He still had to work on the design of the sword.

Creating a soulbound weapon was a vexing task.

There were three parts to it, each presenting its own set of problems.

The first problem was perhaps the simplest to solve, which was not to say the easiest. It was the forging of the sword.

To forge a good sword, Sunny needed good materials. Usually, he would have just gone with the most potent ones at his disposal — those harvested from Great abominations would be ideal. He also needed a set of powerful soul shards, but there were plenty of those.

Of course, the higher the Rank of the material, the harder it was to process it. That was why Sunny did not seriously consider using materials harvested from Cursed beings… even if he managed to get something like that, his own power was insufficient to forge it.

Regardless, the situation was entirely different this time around.

What he wanted to create was a soulbound weapon, so there was no point in making its Rank higher than Neph's own. Actually, it was impossible — since she was a Saint, the sword would inevitably become a Transcendent one. Therefore, using stronger materials would only waste them.

Whatever material Sunny did use would be refined into a greater version of itself by the flames of Changing Star's soul as she walked the path of Ascension. Really, there was no one better suited to wield a soulbound weapon than her — since its power would depend on the power of her soul, and her soul was bolstered by the radiant lineage of Sun God.

So, what Sunny needed was not the strongest material. What he needed was the material with the highest affinity to Nephis and her Aspect. Her weapons and armor had a tendency to melt when she went all out — so, he needed something that would never melt. Something that would channel her immolating power to the fullest extent, as well.

Sunny was pretty sure that he already had the main ingredient at hand.

He looked at a certain spot in the material storage of the Brilliant Emporium. Just by looking there, Sunny felt cold.

What he was staring at… were the shards of the mystical ice that had once been the heart of the Winter Beast. It seemed a little odd, using ice to channel fire — but Sunny believed that there was no better material for Neph's sword.

The only point he was still considering had to do with purity. Was it better to simply use the mystical ice, or create an alloy on its base? A lot of experimentation was needed to answer that question. He had been experimenting for a while now, and would continue to do so for some time.

The second problem he had to solve was the soul binding. That one… was truly vexing. Sunny remembered the weave of the Mantle of the Underworld well, and had come a long way in learning its secrets. He had reached a point where he could theoretically recreate most of its enchantments… except for the one he needed to master the most, the [Prince of the Underworld].

That one had been simply too odd. Back then, in order to fulfill its requirements, Sunny had had to defeat thousands of opponents. The strangest part was that he had not needed to kill them… just defeat them. How did that work? How could a weapon grow stronger from such an abstract thing? There were no soul fragments involved, no absorption of essence.

Was the counter of the [Prince of the Underworld] the means of soul binding, or simply a restriction placed on the onyx armor by its creator? Sunny wasn't sure. All he knew was that once he had filled it, a new enchantment of the Mantle was unlocked — the [Soulbound Relic].

Activating that enchantment had turned the Mantle of the Underworld from a Memory to an Attribute.

Could he simply recreate the [Soulbound Relic] enchantment? Or was

fulfilling the demands of the [Prince of the Underworld] enchantment an integral part of the process?

Recreating either of the enchantments was a titanic task, and Sunny wasn't even sure that what he wanted to achieve would happen on the first try. Once again, more experimentation was needed.

It was to the point that he was considering temporarily manifesting more avatars to keep working on all these tasks.

The third problem, meanwhile, was not as elaborate, but also the most expansive of the three.

It was deciding on what other enchantments he wanted to include, and constructing the map of the weave according to the selection.

Sunny had a lot to select from.

Firstly, he was determined to finally accomplish something that he had been trying to do for a long time — recreate the [Unseen] enchantment of the Moonlight Shard, which allowed the ghostly stiletto to appear instantly in his hand, without any delay between the summoning and the manifestation.

There would need to be an enchantment that augmented the resilience and lethality of the soul blade, as well.

Beyond that, however…

There was too much to choose from.

The [Shapeshifter], [Light Eater], and [Ghost Blade] enchantments of the Cruel Sight. The [Death Dealer] enchantment of Morgan's Warbow. The [Burning Heart] and [Cold Steel] enchantments of the Patient Avenger… and so much more.

Worse still, Sunny felt that simply recreating past enchantments was not enough for the soulbound sword he was going to forge for Nephis. That sword would be a watershed moment in his development as a sorcerer, without a doubt, as well as the mold for the future Memories Sunny would craft for himself.

So, wouldn't it only be suitable for him to fully take a step forward and design unique enchantments of his own?

There was a lot to consider.

…It was a little premature to be considering these things, however, because Sunny had not been coy when he made the deal with Nephis. He really needed to learn how she fought these days to be able to tailor a perfect weapon for her. He had to observe her battle art — her true battle art, not the facsimile she had designed to fool the members of the Great Clan Valor.

And there was so little time left before the war.

Suddenly somber, Sunny looked around the Brilliant Emporium.

The Sword Domain had barely had four years of peace after the disastrous Chain of Nightmares. People were just starting to settle into their new lives, working together to help their kingdom develop… but soon, everything would descend into chaos once again.

What would happen to his shop then?

Would he even be able to keep it open? The restaurant side of the business would suffer the most, no doubt. With a war going on, people would not be in the mood to enjoy delicacies, and neither would they have spare coins to spend. Getting supplies would become a problem, and small private establishments like his would certainly be at the end of the line.

The Memory Boutique would not fare well, either.

Sunny sighed.

'Well, the war has not started yet. There's still time.'

And speaking of time…

He opened his eyes and reluctantly rolled out of bed.

Sunny had not quite gotten his beauty sleep yet, but there was no time to waste. He had to get ready.

The morning was in full swing, which meant that Nephis would be arriving soon.

It was time for their date.

'...Fake date.'

So what? He was excited.

Chapter-1767: Restless Mind

The first customers arrived, and the avatar got busy in the kitchen. Sunny, however, remained on the porch, enjoying the fresh air with a leisurely smile on his lips. The lively noises of the city filled the air like a bright melody.

At some point, the door opened, and Aiko walked out, dressed in a smart business suit and wearing a leather messenger bag over her shoulder. The petite girl yawned, stretched her arms, and mumbled:

"I'm off to the Castle, boss."

Sunny looked at her with a good-natured smile.

"You're delivering Memories, you know. What's up with the bag?"

Aiko stared at him with indignation.

"What do you even know… one has to look the part to make the right impression! That's business essentials!"

She glanced him over with suspicion.

"And speaking of looking the part… you seem a bit different today, boss. What is that… did you style your hair?"

Sunny blinked.

"I did not!"

Aiko gave him a sarcastic nod.

"Uh-huh… sure."

With that, she grinned and hurried away.

"Have fun with Princess Nephis, boss! Perform well! We're raking in real money here, so don't screw it up for us!"

The petite girl used her Aspect to skate on the cobblestones and disappeared behind a corner in the blink of an eye. Sunny was left standing on the porch, flabbergasted.

"What? What does she mean, perform well? I always perform well! Wait… that did not sound right…"

Just at that moment, he felt a familiar presence illuminate the world. Sunny did not have to look to know that Nephis was close.

There was a rustle of feathers, and then, a slender silhouette was standing on the shore of the lake. Her wings had already disappeared, and only a beautiful halo remained, fading slowly as it contoured her figure against the tranquil water.

Nephis was wearing white clothes, her silver hair held down by the Crown of Dawn.

Sunny, dressed in black as usual, froze on the spot.

'D—damn… I hope she did not hear that…'

Noticing him, Nephis smiled lightly and walked over with easy steps.

"Master Sunless. Are you ready?"

He knew that she was terribly busy preparing for the war. However, she had diligently made time to keep their appointments in the past few weeks, and never seemed distracted by other issues in his company, giving him her full attention.

Sunny had a timid hope that Nephis actually enjoyed their outings, and found shelter from the burden of her crushing responsibilities in the time the two of them spent together — no matter how fleeting it was. He was quite pleasant to be around, after all… at least he tried to be, for her.

Of course, it was far more likely that Nephis simply treated their meetings as part of the war preparations. There was a purpose to

them — Sunny was a hired sorcerer who had to forge her a superb sword, after all. So, the diligence she treated him with was the same she afforded her other responsibilities, no more and no less.

Even though he would never admit it, the latter possibility made him upset.

"Master Sunless?"

Sunny lingered for a moment, then offered her a pleasant smile.

"Yes. I am ready."

He offered her his arm, and when she wrapped her own around it, picked up the picnic basket.

He had prepared the food inside himself. He had also bought the picnic basket specifically for the occasion, since nothing in the Brilliant Emporium felt nice enough.

The two of them walked together. Nephis was calm, while Sunny was pretending to be nonchalant. They made for quite a stunning pair, and passersby stared at them with wide eyes... but he did not care. Rather, he enjoyed their stares.

'There, there. Look more!'

"You seem to be in a good mood."

Hearing Neph's remark, Sunny realized that there was a wide smile on his lips. He lowered his gaze in embarrassment.

"Ah… yes. Today seems like a pretty good day. Don't you think so, Lady Nephis?"

She studied his face for a few moments, then smiled slightly and looked away.

"Yes, I have to agree. It does seem like that."

They walked a short distance away and reached a newly built martial hall. Bastion was full of Awakened warriors, and not all of them had

a Legacy clan sponsoring them — so, they needed a place to practice and hone their skills, as well as experienced instructors to guide them.

For an independent Master, opening a martial school was a good way to earn some coin — most seasoned Ascended were busy protecting the human enclaves and subjugating the wilderness of the Dream Realm, so there was always a shortage of good instructors.

Usually, the status of a Master was enough to create a sufficient reputation for a martial school. On any day, there would be a dozen or more warriors practicing inside under the observation of the owner and his Awakened helpers.

But today, the martial hall was entirely empty. Nephis had reserved the whole building, displacing even the founder… their outing had to be public, but what they were about to do had to be kept away from prying eyes at the same time.

Walking inside, she nodded at Sunny and said evenly:

"Get comfortable, Master Sunless. I'll be with you shortly."

Sunny nodded and went to the courtyard of the martial hall, which was fashioned into a sand arena. Sitting down on the spectator bench, he put the picnic basket down and looked at the sky.

'It's indeed a nice day…'

Soon, having changed into a set of training clothes… which looked quite flattering on her despite not being designed for that purpose… Nephis walked into the arena. Picking up an alloy sword from the stand, she swung it a couple of times, nodded in satisfaction, and looked at Sunny.

"I… I'll begin, then."

He nodded.

"I'll be watching."

Nephis lingered for a few moments, then looked away and coughed.

"...Watch well."

With that, she began a set of training exercises. Although slow and weak by Transcendent measures, they were nevertheless full of powerful intent. It was as though Nephis was performing a sword dance, fighting a duel against her shadow.

For a moment, the image of her dancing with the sword fused with his memories of the Black Island, where the two of them had spent a blissful month during the Third Nightmare. Sunny had been mesmerized by her practicing swordsmanship back then, as well.

Her technique had changed tremendously since the Nightmare, though. It was still flowing, versatile, and unpredictable, but had become both different and much more… complete.

What Nephis was showing him today was her true battle art — one that she kept hidden from everyone else. There was no enemy for her to fight and no environment for her to unleash her Aspect, but Sunny could still infer many things from watching these simple katas.

There was one problem, though…

He was having trouble concentrating on the movements of her sword.

Instead, his eyes could not help but follow the movements of her body.

Its graceful lines, contoured by the light fabric of the training suit. The smoothness of her steps, the supple beauty of her form. The beads of sweat glistening on her alabaster skin…

'Ah, I'm in trouble.'

Sunny used all of his self-control to keep his face neutral. He was under terrible strain!

Worst of all… best of all… the day was still young. There were many hours ahead of them.

He took a shaky breath.

'...I'm not going to get a nosebleed, am I?'

Chapter-1768: Swordsmanship Enthusiast

Nephis concentrated on her sword, guiding it with effortless ease. The movements she performed were not particularly fast or taxing… and yet, her body was under tremendous strain, beads of sweat forming on her fair skin. Her breathing was controlled, but heavy.

That was because she had to infuse her swordsmanship with sincere intent. Without the intent, her display would be meaningless — she would fail to show the essence of her technique to the young enchanter, and he would not be able to forge a suitable blade.

She was straining herself… but, at the same time, she was enjoying herself.

That was because she did not need to think about anything else but the sword in these rare moments of peace. Meeting Master Sunless was not entirely without purpose, but compared to the rest of her endless errands and obligations, it was a respite.

Nephis had always been driven, and never allowed herself to get distracted from the goal. But that was not because she never wanted to put it all aside and enjoy some rest… it was simply because she could not allow herself to do so. Falling behind meant death, and even worse than that, failure.

With the war approaching, the pressure on her had only increased even further. It had increased tremendously. There was so much to do, so much to prepare, so much to foresee and assess and consider… and even then, there was so much uncertainty. The uncertainty of it all was the most burdensome, and even with the help of her companions, it was almost overwhelming.

Because their lives, too, depended on her. She had pulled them into

the maelstrom of ruinous change, and it was up to her to see them safely to the shore.

Which was why Nephis secretly enjoyed the time she spent with Master Sunless. The charming enchanter was kind, nice… and, if she was honest with herself, quite pleasing to the eye. There was nothing wrong with indulging in stealing glances at him from time to time, of course… everyone loved beautiful things, after all. She wasn't an exception.

But his looks were not as important as the fact that he was far removed from the dreadful matters involving war, bloodshed, and boundless heartbreak. To the Sovereigns, the dead gods, and the fate of the world.

On the rare occasions she was in his company, Nephis could allow her tired mind to relax, and concentrate only on simple things. Like wielding her sword.

She had always loved swordsmanship, but now… as it turned out, performing it for someone to see was strangely rewarding.

Especially because Master Sunless always watched her intently… very intently, even, never missing a single move.

Nephis was satisfied.

'He must really appreciate swordsmanship…'

Who knew that the gentle enchanter had such a voracious appreciation for combat techniques?

It felt good to be appreciated.

[Hey, Neph.]

Cassie's voice did not distract her from dancing with her sword. Nephis took a step forward and performed a smooth slash, then answered calmly.

[Yes? Did something happen?]

The response came a few moments later.

[No, not really. It's just that… can you do me a favor?]

Nephis spun her sword into a flowing chain of swift attacks and couldn't help but notice the enchanter's glistening onyx eyes, which followed her movements attentively.

[Sure. What do you need?]

Cassie hesitated for a while.

Was her voice a little strange? Nephis felt reluctant to consider that issue. Cassie had been suffering greatly after losing her prophetic gift, and was only recently able to recover. She didn't want to see her friend fall into an unsettled state again.

However, Cassie's next words almost made her stumble.

[Can you… give Master Sunless a hug?]

Nephis struggled to control her sword.

[W—what? A—absolutely not! I… I am not going to hug him! Why are you even asking me to do something like this?]

Cassie remained silent for a bit, then sighed.

[Well… whatever. I can't tell you. If you don't want to, don't.]

She didn't say anything else.

Nephis was stunned.

'That's… that's right! I don't want to, and so I won't.'

However…

The thought of embracing the charming enchanter had already been planted in her mind, refusing to disappear. After all, people didn't just like looking at beautiful things...

Like that time in the lakeshore park, when he tripped and tried to

cover his clumsiness with an equally clumsy excuse.

'Damn you, Cassie!'

Distracted, Nephis failed to suppress her strength and put too much force into her next swing.

The alloy training sword was not meant to be used by Saints, and so, it shattered under the terrible strain.

Nephis stumbled.

The tip of the blade broke off, whistling as it shot through the air with terrible speed…

And struck Master Sunless, who had been slow to react, straight in the face.

She flinched.

'Oh, no!'

Before he could even recover, Nephis was already beside him. She traversed the entire arena with a single push, appearing near the spectator seats almost instantaneously.

The charming enchanter had barely had time to react, raising his hands to clutch at his face. Nephis kneeled beside him and raised her own, her gaze anxious.

He was a Master, so an alloy blade would not hurt him too much… but still, still. She was very angry at herself, and concerned about him.

"Master Sunless… please, lower your hands. Let me see."

Covering half of his face, he looked at her with one eye and forced out a smile.

"...It's fine, Lady Nephis. I'm tougher than I look. You don't have to worry."

She gritted her teeth.

"Still. Let me see."

The enchanter lingered for a while, then lowered his hands obediently.

Nephis let out a relieved sigh.

She was certain that she would see blood, but the alloy blade somehow failed to break skin despite its dire speed. Nevertheless, his cheek and brow were red and swollen, and there would be a serious bruise on his face before too long.

Scowling, she took his chin with one hand and gently touched his face with the other.

'It's fine… the bone isn't fractured. Just a bruise.'

Nephis calmed down.

In the next moment, however, she realized the position they were in.

Master Sunless was sitting, while she was kneeling on the ground beside him. She was holding his face, and they were terribly close to each other.

His onyx eyes were right in front of her, looking into hers. They were like deep pools of cool darkness.

She could see her disheveled reflection in them.

The young enchanter remained still, looking at her silently

Nephis hesitated for a few moments, then said with false calmness:

"Don't move."

In the next moment, a soft radiance ignited under the skin of her hands.

She was assaulted by the familiar agony, but at the same time, she saw a hint of relief smooth his features. The swelling subsided and

disappeared altogether, leaving his skin flawless and unblemished, just as it had been before.

It was cool, silky, and soft to the touch.

"There. All better."

Nephis smiled and felt the corner of his mouth rise into a subtle smile under her fingers.

'...Why am I still holding his face?'

She lingered for a few moments, then lowered her hands.

With a bit of reluctance...

Chapter-1769: Dreams Old and New

To hide her embarrassment, Nephis left to wash off her sweat and change clothes. When she regained her composure and returned, her hair still glistening with moisture, Master Sunless gave her a peculiar glance and looked away.

She would have thought that he was uncomfortable because of being hurt by her just now… if not for the fact that she could feel his desire burning hotly deep within his soul.

The gentle enchanter was not uncomfortable. He was just trying to hide being moved by her appearance… his yearning was usually vague and subdued, as if something was obscuring it from her senses. But she knew that it was there.

Being aware of something like that would make most people feel uneasy, or at least make them act as if they were uneasy. However, Nephis did not mind too much either way.

As her ability to sense longing developed, she had come to know that humans were creatures led by their desires, and that this kind of yearning was both the most common and the one they hid most thoroughly. It had been a bit of a shock for her to learn how many men secretly felt it in her presence, but she quickly came to peace with it.

It was simply human nature. What mattered was not how they felt, but how they chose to act. Some were slaves to their desires, while some were masters of themselves, and lived their lives with clear minds.

Master Sunless was never unpleasant in his actions, and treated her with the utmost decorum. His mind was clear, and his intentions

were pure. So, Nephis was not at all appalled by the hidden flames burning in his soul.

In fact, for the first time, she was a bit pleased to know that someone felt that way about her.

At least she wasn't the only one getting flustered all the time!

Now that the sword demonstration was over, there was some time left before the next item on their schedule. The schedule had been prepared by Cassie, who was in charge of maintaining the facade of their fake relationship and keeping the sword commission a secret, but it wasn't very strict. So, Nephis and Master Sunless had some freedom in what they chose to do.

Today, for example, he had prepared a picnic.

Nephis had a vague notion that picnics were usually held in nicer settings, but due to the difficulty of finding privacy in Bastion, they were forced to eat right here in the martial hall.

She sighed wistfully.

'Maybe I should invite him to the Ivory Island next time. It's peaceful there, and the lake is beautiful.'

But then, she blushed slightly.

Would that be considered inviting a man over? She lived on the Ivory Island, after all… what would he think?

...What would she want him to think?

The charming enchanter, meanwhile, spread a beautiful tablecloth on the bench and placed various snacks on it. There was also a jar of freshly squeezed fruit juice, and some ice to keep it cool.

Smiling, he gestured to the food.

"Please enjoy, Lady Nephis."

She was quite hungry after the strenuous sword practice, so his

invitation was most welcome. Truth be told, Nephis had never paid much attention to food... but everything prepared by Master Sunless was simply too delicious. She enjoyed these meals quite a bit.

Picking up a sandwich, she took a bite. The bread was fresh and crisp, the meat had a delightful texture, and the combination of lettuce and tomatoes was just right to make the sandwich juicy without becoming soggy. The homemade sauce added enough flavor to make the ingredients shine, but not so much as to overwhelm their natural taste.

It was delectable.

One could tell a lot about an Awakened from their cooking. Nephis had tasted enough meals prepared by Master Sunless to guess a few things, as well.

His habits were very eclectic, like those of a man who had wandered a lot. There was a certain spontaneity to them, as well, hinting that his skill had developed gradually by trial and error, as opposed to having been taught by experienced tutors of a Legacy clan.

There were influences of Bastion and several other regions in the sword Domain, the efficient practicality common among the veterans of the Southern Campaign, and even hints of the Forgotten Shore in his cooking — the latter most likely picked up from working in the kitchen with Aiko.

He was a very talented cook. Nephis had tasted dishes prepared for the royal table by renowned chefs, and while Master Sunless was not nearly as sophisticated, she found herself preferring his simple cooking to those exquisite meals... by far.

She looked at him, finished her delicious sandwich, and asked with curiosity:

"Were you always good at cooking, Master Sunless?"

He smiled and shook his head.

"No, not at all. Actually, I grew up eating nothing but synthpaste. I only tasted real food after becoming a Sleeper, at the Academy. Let

me tell you, Lady Nephis… it was quite a shock!"

Nephis felt sad for a moment. How poor his background must have been, to only get access to palatable food after becoming infected by the Nightmare Spell? She had not known that about him.

Now that Nephis thought about it, she knew very little about the young enchanter, despite having spent time with him on many occasions.

She hesitated for a few moments, then asked:

"Was that why you decided to open a restaurant?"

Master Sunless looked at her with a surprise and remained silent for a bit. It looked as if he was reminiscing.

After a while, he chuckled and shook his head again.

"No. My original dream was to own a Memory shop. I don't actually remember where I got the idea to open a restaurant, as well… must have been sometime during the Chain of Nightmares. I just figured that feeding people would feel nice. Oh, and earn me some money, as well."

Nephis was stumped by that answer.

There was nothing shameful about owning a Memory shop. She believed strongly that it was the duty of all Awakened to resist the Nightmare Spell, but that did not mean that everyone had to spill blood on the battlefield.

There were those with unsuitable dispositions or Utility Aspects who maintained the cities, grew crops, and supplied the warriors with equipment — their work was no less important.

So, Master Sunless was a dutiful person, as well. The Memories he crafted helped those better suited for the battlefield defeat Nightmare Creatures and come home alive.

It was just that… Nephis herself dreamed of something so heavy and unattainable. Wasn't owning a shop too trivial of a thing to be

someone's dream?

Perhaps reading something on her face, the charming enchanter smiled.

"It might be difficult for someone as accomplished as you to understand, Lady Nephis. You are a storied champion of humanity, after all… but most people never grow numb to the horrors of the Nightmare Spell. Even if they are seasoned warriors, they would still prefer living quietly away from the abominable monsters and mortal danger.

Dreaming of something so mundane might seem strange to you, but in fact, these mundane things are what most people dream about."

Nephis looked at him thoughtfully.

He was right, of course. She had always been quite different from most people, and felt alienated as a result. She also knew that it was her who was abnormal, not the other way around.

For a moment, Nephis tried to imagine what it would be like, to have a mundane dream. If her life had been different, what would her heart strive for?

She looked at the training arena.

Would she have wanted to open a martial school like this one and dedicate her life to the pursuit of swordsmanship, sharing her insights with students and feeling joy every day?

Would she maybe dedicate her life to music? Playing an instrument had never been among the lessons taught to her as a Legacy, so Nephis had no such skill. But she had often fantasized about performing music as a child.

Were dreams supposed to be like that?

Nephis enjoyed a piece of savory meat pie, then asked with genuine curiosity:

"What does it feel like, to accomplish your dream?"

Her own had always been so out of reach, so burdensome. It was all-consuming and overwhelming, much larger than her life... and yet, she could not quite imagine living any other way.

Master Sunless remained silent for a while, then smiled wistfully.

"Who knows? I certainly don't. By the time I found myself in a position to open a shop, too many things had happened. I changed, and my dreams changed as well. Still, I guess it depends on what you used to dream about. My old dream was rather nice, so the life I've built due to its influence is also on the nicer side.

It's… peaceful."

Nephis raised her eyebrow.

"What is your dream now, then?"

He looked at her intently and hesitated for a few moments.

Then, the charming enchanter chuckled.

"That… I don't really have dreams anymore. I just have goals. Having a goal is much better than having a dream, don't you think?"

She pondered his words for a few moments and asked neutrally:

"What's the difference?"

Master Sunless looked away and sighed.

"I'd say that the difference is in how you approach it. A dream is something you want to happen… a goal is something that you make happen. The difference is in having enough determination to grasp what you want, and never let it go."

He remained silent for a while, and then added with a hint of sadness in his pleasant voice:

"But I… to be honest, I've let go of a few things in my life. So if there is something I really want, it's to go back and try again. That is not a dream, though. Since it's in the past, it is just a regret."

The charming enchanter emptied his glass, then looked at her and smiled.

"Now that I think about it, I guess I do have a dream."

His onyx eyes looked into hers, glistening in the sunlight.

"It's to live my life never feeling regret again."

Nephis smiled.

It was a good dream.

Chapter-1770: Keen Insight

Leaving the martial hall, they went for a walk. Sunny offered Nephis his arm once again, and they strolled along the lively streets of Bastion, making sure to be seen by as many people as possible.

It wasn't every day that ordinary citizens could catch a glimpse of Changing Star, so many were stunned and excited. She smiled politely at them and nodded from time to time.

Luckily, a Saint was different from a celebrity. Although she was immensely popular, people treated her with a sense of solemn veneration. No one bothered them wanting to receive an autograph, and no one tried to exchange words with her — they just looked from afar and kept a respectful distance.

Nephis herself, meanwhile, was quite curious about the details of the day-to-day life of the city. As they walked, she often asked Sunny to explain this or that, listening to his explanations with keen interest.

"...Before last year, most people in Bastion sustained themselves on the food rations delivered from the waking world and the meat brought back by the abomination hunters. But then, the fields outside the city were finally able to yield a harvest — crops capable of thriving in the Dream Realm soil had been cultivated decades ago, but scaling the production took time.

In any case, the city is almost self-sufficient now. These food stalls became popular after the supply of locally sourced flour stabilized, as well. Would you like to try a fish cake? It's not really fish, of course… but it's still delicious…"

She smiled and shook her head.

"No, thank you. I am quite full."

Hearing that, Sunny felt satisfied. It seemed that she had enjoyed the picnic.

Feeding people felt nice, indeed...

Especially this particular person.

Nephis looked at him with curiosity, and then asked in a neutral tone:

"Master Sunless… can I ask you a question?"

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Of course."

She lingered for a moment.

"You've been observing my swordsmanship. What did you see?"

He had expected her to ask that, somewhat.

The arrangement between Nephis and him was for the purpose of crafting a weapon for her, and to do that, Sunny had requested to study her swordsmanship and battle technique.

However, his persona was that of a sorcerer, not a warrior. Nephis did not know how deep his understanding of combat went, and if he was even capable of learning anything about her transcendent battle prowess. In fact, if anything, she would think that his knowledge of swordsmanship was shallow.

She did not know that although Sunny's understanding of combat was not the deepest in the world, it was certainly the broadest. He doubted that anyone, including her and the three Sovereigns, had absorbed as many battle styles as he had.

So, Nephis was curious to learn how much he saw, and to what degree he was capable of appreciating her swordsmanship.

Sunny remained silent for a while, then sighed and said in a somber tone:

"Your swordsmanship… is ruthless."

She seemed amused by his answer.

"Ruthless?"

He nodded and contemplated his next words carefully.

"At first, I was really surprised. You are renowned across two worlds as one of the most skilled warriors of humanity, Lady Nephis. You are also the daughter of Broken Sword, whose swordsmanship is legendary. And yet… your technique seems grossly reckless and unbalanced."

She smiled silently.

Sunny coughed, and then continued calmly:

"It is an exceedingly aggressive style, and your offense is stunningly lethal. However, the defense… the Master of that martial hall earlier would have beaten his students senseless if he saw them neglecting defense to that degree. Despite that, your footwork is too strange. It is meaninglessly conservative, to the point of appearing awkward. It's all a proper mess."

Nephis laughed quietly.

"In other words… I am a fraud?"

He smiled sadly, then shook his head.

"It would seem like that, but of course, it is not true. The truth of the matter is that you are too ruthless."

Sunny's smile faded slowly.

"Your battle art has no mercy at all — not for your enemies, and not for yourself. You disregard defense because you expect to be hurt, mauled, and maimed. Your Aspect allows you to recover from almost any wound, after all, so no matter how terribly your body is mutilated, you can continue to fight. For that reason, your style simply breaks every possible convention of combat technique.

You've reinvented the very concept of swordsmanship from the ground up, removing self-preservation from its foundation."

He sighed.

"Of course, simply removing one of the cornerstones of swordsmanship is not enough to create a functional battle art. You also had to replace every basic principle of combat connected to it with a new one, incorporating being hurt into the very core of your technique. Your flesh might heal, but force is still transferred when you receive a blow. Your balance is still affected.

Your sword won't strike true if your sword arm is severed. So, you did not simply discard defense in favor of overwhelming offense. Rather, you replaced defense with controlled harm, learning how to kill the enemy in the most efficient way while sacrificing your body in the most calculated manner."

His expression turned somber.

"That is why your technique seems so reckless, and why your footwork is so strange. Of course, that impression is woefully wrong. In truth, you are not reckless at all… instead, you are so strategic that it is almost chilling. Your knowledge of physics, anatomy, and the underlying laws of combat has to be staggering… otherwise, you wouldn't have been able to create such a diabolical battle art."

Nephis seemed very satisfied by his answer. She looked at him with visible appreciation, and then smiled.

Her striking grey eyes were almost beaming.

"I didn't expect you to possess such keen insight, Master Sunless. Your expertise in swordsmanship is truly outstanding."

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then looked away and sighed again.

"Well… it's just a preliminary conclusion, and a shallow one at that. There is a limit to how much I can learn from watching you practice. To truly understand enough, I'll need to observe you in actual battle."

Her smile widened a little.

It was a rare sight, to see Nephis smiling like that.

…Which was a shame, because her sincere smile was simply too beautiful.

Sunny felt his heart skipping a beat.

She chuckled quietly, and then said in a pleased tone:

"You shared your insight, but not your opinion. What do you think of my swordsmanship, Master Sunless? Care to give me a compliment?"

He looked away and hesitated for a while.

There were a lot of flowery words he could use to describe her technique. It was quite tantalizing, after all, not to mention lethal and deeply ingenious.

However, in the end, what he said was something else.

"It's inhuman."

The smile froze on Neph's face, and her mirth was replaced by confusion.

"...Inhuman?"

Sunny nodded somberly.

"It is built upon pain, Lady Nephis. Humans naturally avoid suffering… so, forgive me for being presumptuous. But I really wish that you avoided getting hurt, as well."

Nephis stared at him for a few moments, then turned away and shrugged with a faint smile.

When she spoke, her voice sounded a little wistful.

"It's just pain."

He looked at her, his eyes full of darkness.

'Those words again…'

Sunny studied her beautiful face for a while. Her hand was resting on his forearm, and he could feel her presence illuminate the world like a warm sun.

Why did such a radiant person have to live in constant agony? Why did she have to grow numb to pain?

He opened his mouth, then closed it and exhaled slowly.

Then, he smiled and said in a light tone:

"Still. Try not to get hurt too much, Lady Nephis. It might be hard to believe because of my outstanding and refined appearance, but I actually know a thing or two about pain… one time, I wasn't mindful enough and grabbed a hot pan! It hurt like hell… I have been very careful around pans since then…"

Nephis glanced at him, blinked a couple of times, and then laughed.

By then, they have already reached their destination…

It was a theater hosting a popular play.

Chapter-1771: Curtain Call

There was a private box reserved for Nephis and Sunny. They were guided there by a young stagehand, who was visibly struggling to maintain decorum while bursting at the seams with excitement. It was not every day that Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan visited a theater! In fact, Sunny was pretty sure that she had never participated in these kinds of social activities before.

There would be a freshly embossed plaque nailed in the foyer of the theater by tomorrow, no doubt. Something like "This humble establishment has enjoyed the patronage of the brightest of stars" or "We are proud to have hosted Her Royal Highness, Saint Nephis of Immortal Flame".

Such a simple thing was enough to enhance the theater's prestige twofold.

'I wonder if this place is secretly sponsored by Cassie.'

The box was luxuriously furnished, dark, and elevated above the auditorium high enough so that no one could see what was happening inside.

Sunny felt frustrated at the fact that his heart was almost racing.

Letting out a sigh, he glanced at the stage and took a seat. The curtain had not been raised yet, and the audience was filling in with excited whispers. He was distracted for a moment when Nephis sat down near him, their shoulders almost touching.

'This private box is a bit cramped, isn't it?'

Well, it couldn't be helped.

He remained silent for a moment, then asked in a neutral tone:

"By the way, what play are we watching?"

Nephis looked at him with a hint of surprise.

"You don't know?"

Sunny shook his head.

"I'm afraid I don't."

She seemed a little embarrassed, for some reason.

Nephis hesitated for a while, then coughed awkwardly.

"...Actually, I don't know either. Cassie… Saint Cassia arranged it. I assumed you would have been informed."

Sunny chuckled.

"Well, it will be a surprise then. Who knows, we might enjoy it a great deal."

Actually, he didn't really care about the contents of the play. He doubted he would be able to concentrate on the actors, anyway, when Nephis was so close to him, in the darkness.

Soon, the lights dimmed, and the curtains were slowly pulled. The audience held its breath.

At the same time, Sunny's smile froze on his lips.

In fact, he had stopped breathing entirely.

His expression slowly crumbled, and he barely suppressed a tormented groan.

Because right at that moment, he saw the title of the play above the decorations. Written in a purposefully messy scrawl, several words were displayed on dark background…

[The Devil of Antarctica]

'Oh, no!'

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On the stage, the decorations were divided into two distinct locations. On one, a military boat sailed on an icy sea. On the other, tall mountain peaks towered above a snowy cliff.

Sunny tried to sink into his chair, raising a trembling hand to cover his face. He didn't even care if Nephis would notice his strange behavior. He just wanted to disappear and be somewhere — anywhere! — else the next moment.

'I'm done for!'

There was an actress wearing a black armor standing on the snowy cliff, gazing down at the audience with a somber look. The armor design was quite austere, but somehow managed to accentuate every curve of her quite… distinguished body very well. Her blonde hair moved slightly in the artificial wind, and her bright blue eyes were full of harsh resolve.

The military boat, meanwhile, seated seven soldiers in the uniforms of the First Evacuation Army. Their leader was standing at the bow, peering ahead with a stoic expression on his chiseled face. He was close to two meters in height and possessed a formidable build, oozing rugged masculinity. The makeup made him look extremely pale, and he seemed to be wearing a black wig.

Sunny took a shaky breath.

'...These bastards!'

Both the distinguished actress and the square-jawed man were supposed to be inspired by him. He could live with the brutish guy… but the well-proportioned beauty?! Really?!

This was why he had avoided watching the movie version at all costs.

Now, however, Sunny had no choice but to watch.

He squirmed silently.

At that moment, one of the soldiers said to his comrades on the boat:

"Why so glum, comrades? Cheer up! We are nearing Antarctica. Nightmare Creatures stand no chance against the heroic soldiers of the Evacuation Army!"

Immediately, the leader cut him off with a sharp gaze and scoffed.

"Good attitude, soldier! However, the message is wrong. Don't underestimate the enemy. Heroes won't win this war… so, don't try to be a hero."

He flashed a dark grin and added hoarsely, his rugged voice easily capturing the audience:

"...Be a monster! Be a fiend. That is how you will survive."

Sunny shuddered, knowing that he was in for a very, very long couple of hours.

The play followed two Ascended. One of them was an antihero only known as the Captain, who led a convoy of refugees on a tumultuous journey across the Antarctic Center. He possessed a devilish charm and a cynical personality, but displayed a surprising amount of valor and resolve, as well, hiding a compassionate heart under the snide facade of a disillusioned fatalist.

The other was a mysterious female warrior who joined the army in the early stages of the campaign, displaying stunning power and indomitable courage. She was aloof, but noble and selfless, breaking the tide of several dire battles while refusing to say anything about her background and allegiance.

The two quickly became known as the Devil of Antarctica and its Guardian Angel, respectively. Their paths intersected in the middle of the play, during the tragic siege of Falcon Scott, where a tentative romance bloomed between them against the bleak backdrop of war.

Sunny was perfectly expressionless as he watched the play.

'No, but… how does it even make sense? Am I romancing myself?'

He was too embarrassed to look at Nephis, staring directly ahead.

'Ah, I want to die...'

The production was stellar, and the actors were quite talented. The story was not even that tasteless, even if it twisted most facts to fit the narrative presented by the government propaganda machine at the time. It was just that… Sunny had been there!

And he certainly had not been in the habit of constantly spewing witty one-liners, sharing gems of jaded wisdom with the admiring soldiers, and looking soulfully into the distance every other minute!

Worst of all, he felt that the play would be a hit.

The horror!

'And there I was feeling happy that there was no video streaming services in the Dream Realm!'

Feeling a strong desire to manifest a swarm of shadows and collapse the roof of the theater, he furtively glanced at Nephis.

Coincidentally, she was also looking at him at that moment.

Just then, the first act concluded, and the lights went on.

Nephis tilted her head a little and asked neutrally:

"How do you like the play, Master Sunless?"

Sunny forced out a smile.

It was one of the hardest things he had done in his life… and he had put his head back after being decapitated once!

He lingered for a few moments, and then said in a flat tone:

"...It's directed well. I'm not a fan, though."

Nephis chuckled, then sighed.

"I am sorry. I don't know what Cassie was thinking… you participated in the Southern Campaign as well, after all. It must be unpleasant, to see a censored version of the calamity you lived through on the

stage."

She looked at the curtain and shook her head.

"I heard that the Captain is based on a real person. I was in East Antarctica, though, so I wouldn't know. He must have been quite a character."

Sunny did not respond.

'He's quite a character, indeed…'

They spent the intermission in awkward silence. Sunny was thinking of a way to convince Nephis to leave, but sadly, he couldn't think of any. Especially due to her status... an ordinary person could slip away in the middle of a play, but if Changing Star did it, the theater would go bankrupt the next day. Such was the power of her glorious fame.

Eventually, it was time for the second act to start.

It was then that Nephis said calmly, never looking away from the stage.

"We are being watched."

Sunny raised an eyebrow. He usually kept his shadow sense restrained in Bastion, so he wouldn't know.

"Why would anyone be watching us?"

She sighed.

"You don't have to worry. It's nothing serious... someone is probably suspicious and wants to confirm the nature of our relationship."

He relaxed.

"Oh."

She had just survived an assassination attempt recently, and the whole world was in turmoil as a result. There were no riots on the streets, but tensions were running high. If something happened to

Nephis in the meantime... he was afraid that everything would explode.

So, even though it was unpleasant to know that someone was spying on them, Sunny felt relieved.

Not for long, though. Because the second act had started.

On the stage, the Falcon Scott had fallen, and the Devil was separated from the Angel during the evacuation, carried away unconscious on the last ship. The latter was presumed to have perished in the siege.

The second part of the story took place in East Antarctica, where the forces sent by the Legacy clans helped to stem the tide of Nightmare Creatures. The Captain, grief-stricken and heartbroken, went from gazing soulfully into the distance every other minute to doing so about every thirty seconds.

The frequency of his sardonic remarks decreased, but his general disposition had only grown more obnoxious.

Sunny was in a foul mood and grinding his teeth.

…It was then, however, that Nephis raised a hand and wrapped her arm around him firmly, pulling him closer in the darkness.

He froze.

'What… what is she doing?'

"Please forgive me, Master Sunless. We must play our parts, as well."

She was terribly close.

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

Then, a small smile slowly crept onto his face.

"Ah, yes. I guess there's no helping it."

He placed his head on her shoulder in an intimate display.

Whoever was watching them should be able to confirm the nature of

their relationship from that scene. What could he do? There was no choice... he had to cooperate earnestly.

Held comfortably in Neph's embrace, Sunny smiled with satisfaction.

'I must admit…'

The second part of the play was much better than the first.

It was actually not bad at all.

The director really knew what they were doing!

Chapter-1772: Deus Ex Machina

Strangely enough, Nephis was enjoying the play.

The leading actress was good at her craft. The role she was portraying was taciturn and stoic, but revealed a stalwart determination to resist the tide of Nightmare Creatures at all costs… a true warrior. The Guardian Angel of Antarctica did not display a lot of emotions, which could have made some people consider her a flat character.

But personally, Nephis thought that it was the opposite. The actress managed to show the subtlety of someone who was unaccustomed to expressing her emotions openly, and felt that there was no place for such things on the battlefield. It was really quite commendable, even if the Angel seemed a bit lonesome as a result.

The protagonist was her complete opposite. He was very emotive and did not shy away from voicing his opinions, even if these opinions were usually not something people would want to hear. His dry wit and casual nonchalance were disarming, and his slightly comical persona was strangely endearing. His heart was in the right place, too…

And yet, Nephis found herself unable to fully immerse herself in his character. The actor portraying the Devil was handling the role well, so there was nothing to complain about. It was just that… how could she put it? The man was a bit too… brawny. She had never really considered the matter, but now, Nephis suddenly realized that rugged men like that did not suit her taste very much.

She was inclined to appreciate men like Master Sunless much better.

Feeling the pleasant weight of his head on her shoulder, she smiled subtly in the darkness.

'How did I end up in this situation?'

The charming enchanter was leaning on her comfortably. Her arm was wrapped around him, as if they were really in that kind of relationship. It was true that there was someone in the theater observing them, but had there really been a need for a display of intimacy?

She had done it mostly on impulse, perhaps because Cassie's unexpected request was still stuck in her mind.

But, well… Nephis didn't mind the result. It felt quite nice.

Enjoying the novel feeling of closeness, she continued to watch the play.

On the stage, the touching love story between the Devil and the Angel had already progressed, and was now nearing a tragic culmination. After being reunited in East Antarctica and confessing their feelings, the heroes faced a deadly crisis.

She tilted her head and accidentally rested her cheek on top of the charming enchanter's head, feeling the silky texture of his raven-black hair. Nephis froze for a moment, perplexed, then made a hard decision... to pretend that she had done it on purpose, and that everything was going according to plan.

Just like that, there was something to distract her from the utterly fictional depiction of the Battle of the Black Skull happening on the stage…

There was no mention of the Great Clans having fought each other, of course. Instead, they were shown as self-sacrificing champions of humanity who had ventured into the wilderness to buy King Anvil and his cohort enough time to conquer the Fourth Nightmare.

The Angel had already revealed herself as a disgraced retainer of Clan Valor, and now, the heroes were trying to stall the tide of dreadful abominations in a desperate last stand.

The play took some liberties with the original film's plot, it seemed, adapting it to the sensibilities of the people living in the Sword

Domain.

On the stage, the Angel was supporting the Devil, both of them battered and covered in fake blood.

"Hold on! We must hold on, Captain! The King of Valor will be here soon!"

The square jaw of the protagonist trembled, and he forced out his familiar devilish grin.

"I'm afraid… I'm afraid that I will have to break my promise, angel. I'm sorry, but… really, you have no one to blame but yourself. You… should not have fallen in love with a dishonest man like me."

Still smiling fearlessly, he pushed the wounded Angel back, into the hands of his soldiers, and commanded them to retreat.

Left alone, the Devil faced the encroaching shadow — created by special effects, it represented the Great abominations that had escaped the Category Four Gates.

A sarcastic scoff escaped from his lips.

"I really thought I'd make it. Well, never mind. This devil's time away from hell is coming to an end… ah, what a sweet dream it has been! Thank you, my love."

Nephis could hear quiet sobs in the audience. She could also feel Master Sunless tremble slightly.

Was he… quite affected by the play? His reactions seemed quite intense from the very start. The charming enchanter was surprisingly emotional...

She wondered idly if he knew the truth about the Battle of the Black Skull. He wasn't there, after all, and most people believed in the false record of what had happened on that day.

The truth was not nearly as romantic.

Knowing what would happen next, Nephis sighed and suddenly

wished to fall through the ground.

Was there still a chance to set fire to the theater? That would interrupt the play, for sure…

Master Sunless felt her tension and shifted slightly, looking up.

His terribly handsome face was suddenly way too close.

"What is the matter?"

She tried very hard to hide her embarrassment, looked away, and said in a flat tone:

"It's nothing."

But just then…

The stage was suddenly drowned in bright light, which chased away the encroaching darkness.

A beautiful young woman in white clothes that were a little bit too tight for her generous figure was lowered from above on invisible ropes, somehow maintaining a graceful image despite two heavy wings attached to her back by a hidden harness.

She held a radiant sword in her hand, her face the perfect picture of enlightened valiance.

Nephis sighed and covered her face with a palm.

There were a few joyful yelps from the audience.

"It's Lady Changing Star!"

"The King has returned from the Nightmare!"

"Please save him, Lady Nephis! Hurry!"

…Indeed.

The actress being lowered from above was the very same ingénue who played Nephis in the local rendition of that accursed movie…

she was portraying Changing Star.

Nephis could feel the enchanter's body trembling once again.

Glancing at him between her fingers, she was startled to see that he was trying to suppress laughter.

Her expression fell a little.

"...What's so funny?"

Master Sunless looked at her with a smile, his onyx eyes glistening with mirth. Then, he shook his head apologetically.

"No, no… please forgive me, Lady Nephis. It's just a bit of schadenfreude…"

Hearing that, she was suddenly in the mood to do something that she had never done before.

Nephis wanted to pout.

Turning away from him, she remained silent for a few moments, and then said evenly:

"I'm glad my suffering amuses you."

Master Sunless gasped and stared at her with a hint of panic in his gem-like eyes.

Nephis tried to maintain a calm facade, but the corner of her mouth curled upward against her will.

She sighed and closed her eyes.

'Cute!'

…On the stage, Changing Star saved the day. The Devil was rescued and reunited with the Angel, who had led the Valor reinforcements to his position. The King of Swords descended to Antarctica, eradicating the Nightmare Creatures and leading the civilians to the Sword Domain.

Due to the bravery and selflessness that the Angel had shown during the Southern Campaign, her past misdeed was pardoned by Princess Nephis, and she was reinstated as a Knight of Valor. The Devil was knighted by the radiant princess, as well, and the two of them became trusted champions of the royal family.

It was a happy ending.

The curtain fell, and the lights went on. The actors returned to the stage to bow and were met by a thunderous applause.

Of course, all of them could not help but throw furtive glances at the private box.

Nephis sighed, then stood up with a pleasant smile and clapped a few times.

At the sight of that, the eyes of the actors shined, and the audience exploded with an even more energetic applause.

Master Sunless watched her with an amused smile, then asked quietly:

"I guess you liked the play, Lady Nephis?"

Nephis lingered for a bit.

What was she supposed to say? That the play was alright, but she really enjoyed the experience of him resting his head on her shoulder as she embraced him in the darkness?

She cleared her throat.

"It was a good performance. However… I'm not sure you'll understand, but it is a really uncomfortable thing to see someone playing you on the stage."

Master Sunless stared at her silently for a few moments.

Then, he looked down with an odd expression and said in a neutral tone:

"Yeah… I guess something like that would be hard to understand…"

Nephis smiled faintly.

'At least Cassie had enough presence of mind not to send us to see the Song of Light and Darkness.'

How would her pretend paramour feel watching a play about a fictional relationship between her and another man?

That would have been a disaster!

Chapter-1773: Fake It

Sunny had been full of bitter resentment when the performance started, but by the end of it, he was in an excellent mood. Watching Nephis dance with her sword, treating her to a picnic, going for a leisurely stroll arm in arm, and enjoying a romantic play together… the day was shaping up great.

Sadly, their time together would soon come to an end. All that was left on the schedule was dinner at an upscale restaurant — after that, Nephis would disappear for a few days or a week, busy with all her other responsibilities.

So, he had to make the most of this dinner appointment.

'I'll take the chance to size up the competition.'

However, Sunny knew that he was fooling himself.

In truth, the Brilliant Emporium could not even be considered a competitor of the lofty restaurant — his café was a place where people could enjoy delicious, but relatively simple food in a cozy atmosphere. The establishment where they were entering right now, though, was where the affluent citizens of Bastion came to waste money and show status in splendid surroundings.

He felt inclined to treat such extravagance with disdain, but found himself unable to do that after being led to a private booth by an exceedingly respectful waiter. Comparing the immaculate attire and flawless manners of the young man to how Aiko usually behaved, Sunny was suddenly unsure of his judgment.

Perhaps these rich folks were really onto something…

But then again, he was richer than all of them combined. Sunny never flaunted his wealth, but it would have been hard to remain

poor after hunting Great Nightmare Creatures for years. And since he didn't really have expenditures like the need to maintain a clan, he was probably the wealthiest man in Bastion, second only to the King of Swords himself.

So, logically, it was the Brilliant Emporium that set the standard of luxury. Everyone else could only hope to imitate his unique style!

Still…

Sunny hands trembled when he sat down and saw a large, empty plate in front of him.

'A ch-ch-charger plate!'

How fancy!

And what was it made of? Was it… the famed Aegis porcelain? That porcelain could only be made from the mystical clay found in a remote region of the Sword Domain, the precise recipe kept secret by the artisans employed by the Legacy Clan presiding over those lands.

The tablecloth was made from sublime silk. The utensils were pure silver. The table itself… damnation, he recognized that wood! That was titanwood, the same as the instructor's cafeteria at the Academy!

At least his chair was, in all ways, inferior to the Shadow Chair. Otherwise, Sunny would have been quite disheartened.

Nephis sat down across from him and smiled.

"I doubt that they will serve us anything as delicious as what you make, Master Sunless. Still, please try to enjoy yourself."

Sunny looked at her with gratitude, suddenly feeling a lot better.

'Right. Who cares about how fancy the plates, silverware, and furniture are? It's the food that matters!'

Paying attention to form over substance was a silly thing to do, like valuing flowery prose over an engaging story. Sunny might have acted like a bit of an idiot at times, but at least he wasn't that

misguided.

He stared at Nephis silently while the waiter was pouring fragrant wine into their glasses, enchanted by her exquisite beauty. The light of a magical chandelier was reflecting from her silver hair, and her fair face was illuminated softly. The privacy of the luxurious booth created an intimate atmosphere…

It was then that a sudden thought entered his mind, and he felt as if someone had doused him with cold water.

Sunny looked away and lowered his head a little.

The war was approaching. Which meant that he had to tell Nephis the truth soon.

There would not be many days like this one in the future… in fact, there might be none at all.

He felt a sense of deep melancholy.

When the waiter left, Nephis took a sip of wine and leaned back. She remained silent for a few moments, then asked with a hint of concern in her voice:

"I'm sorry for making you feel uncomfortable earlier, Master Sunless. Because of the subject of the play, and… well… my actions, as well."

Sunny looked at her in surprise.

"Offended? No, I wasn't offended…"

Nephis smiled.

"That's a relief."

She placed the wineglass back on the table.

The table was meant for two people to dine, so it wasn't very large. Her hand remained on the white tablecloth, close enough that Sunny could reach and hold it. Of course, he did no such thing, and just stared at it silently.

Nephis suddenly asked, her voice neutral:

"What do people usually talk about in such situations?"

He raised an eyebrow.

"Such situations?"

She hesitated for a few moments, then reached for the wineglass again.

"That… you know, on a date. Ours is a fake one, but we should probably make an effort to make it look real."

Sunny felt bewildered for a moment.

Eventually, he smiled and shrugged slowly.

"Lady Nephis… I'm afraid I have no idea. I don't think I've ever been on a proper date myself."

She looked at him with a visible expression of surprise, which was quite rare for the usually composed Nephis.

Her eyes widened a little.

"R—really? I thought you… a man like you…"

Sunny chuckled.

"I'm not sure what kind of man you think I am, but your impression of me is probably wrong. In fact…"

He hesitated for a moment, and then added wistfully:

"It most definitely is."

Sunny took a sip of wine and said in a neutral tone:

"Well, I assume that people talk about the usual things that one ought to know about a potential partner, romantic or not. You know… background, views, aspirations. Who they are, what they want. Things like that."

Nephis studied his face for a while, then nodded.

"Let's do that, then. That play earlier… I was afraid that you would be uncomfortable because of your experiences in Antarctica. That was why I… actually, never mind! What I wanted to say is that I don't really know a lot about what you went through there, Master Sunless. Were you part of the Second Evacuation Army? Or of the local forces?"

He smiled and shook his head lightly.

"First Evacuation Army, actually."

She seemed surprised.

"Then…"

The Second Evacuation Army was mostly composed of volunteers, while the local Awakened had no choice but to join the Southern Campaign. The members of the First Army, however, were all from the core government forces.

Sunny chuckled.

"No, no. I was never a government grunt. It's just that I had a friend in the chain of command, and was invited to join the effort before the news broke. It's a bit shameful to admit, but… I threw a big tantrum back then and accepted the invitation for quite an immature reason."

Nephis looked at him intently, as if trying to picture him throwing a tantrum in her mind. Eventually, she shook her head and said:

"I can't quite imagine you doing something like that. Immature reason... really?"

He smiled and took another sip of wine.

"Yes. It was mostly to spite someone… a very childish reaction, in hindsight. Well, there were other reasons, of course, some better than others. You know — finding conviction, pursuing strength. It all seemed very important before the Chain of Nightmares started, and very meaningless pretty much immediately after it did."

At that moment, the waiter arrived to serve the first course. Sunny stared at the elaborate appetizers for a bit, but he did not really have an appetite anymore.

Looking at Nephis, he said:

"I think it's a bit unfair on you to have a conversation about background, views, and aspirations with someone, Lady Nephis. It is bound to be one-sided. You are exceedingly famous, after all… everyone knows these things about you."

The waiter left.

She also ignored the food, taking a sip of wine in silence.

Then, she placed the glass down and smiled faintly.

"You of all people should know that what people say about me and what is true are not the same, Master Sunless. After all, one of the things they say is that I am indulging you because we are lovers."

He laughed quietly.

"Indeed."

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then asked in a pleasant tone:

"In that case, let me ask you something. What are your aspirations, Lady Nephis? What do you want?"

She considered his words and answered with a careless shrug:

"It's nothing unexpected, I guess. Keep my soldiers alive, safeguard the Sword Domain. Watch cities like Bastion thrive."

Sunny shook his glass a little, watching the light reflect from the red wine.

…He wasn't the only one hiding the truth.

Lies. It was all lies.

He wasn't telling the truth, and Nephis wasn't being honest either.

Their date was truly a fake one.

Since he was not saying anything, she went forward and asked:

"What about you, Master Sunless? What do you want?"

Sunny shifted his gaze and looked at her hand once again. There was a hint of a deep longing in his dark eyes.

He did not speak until the pain of the Flaw made it impossible to remain silent.

'To hell with it…'

Looking up at Nephis, Sunny lingered for a moment, and then smiled faintly.

"I… find myself wishing that our date wasn't a fake one. I want it to be real instead. Is that too forward?"

Chapter-1774: Till You Make It

Sunny went ahead and expressed his real feelings without thinking about the consequences. Which could be quite heartbreaking, one way or the other... but, really, he didn't have much to lose.

Nephis did not react immediately. Her face remained composed and impassive.

After a while, she said evenly:

"It's not."

Sunny sighed and leaned back.

What was he doing?

Cassie had been right. By keeping his true identity from Nephis, he was being truly unfair. What kind of relationship did he hope to build on the foundation of deceit?

And that was what he was doing — deceiving her.

But… despite that, Cassie had also been wrong. She wanted to avoid a predicament that was merely the result of a larger and entirely unsolvable problem.

Because Sunny simply could not be honest with Nephis. It was impossible, because even if he told her the actual truth, she would forget it a few moments later.

So what if he admitted to being the Lord of Shadows? Compared to the other things he was keeping from her, that detail was all but insignificant.

She could never know that he had loved her for a long, long time… and that she had loved him. That they had spent years thinking about

each other, fighting side by side with each other, and surviving the horrors of the Nightmare Spell together. That they had met when they were young and inexperienced, each spending their tumultuous youth being shaped by the other.

That the troubled adults they had grown into were the result of them having met all those years ago, in front of the gates of the Academy.

That she was his person, and he was hers.

These were the things Nephis would never know, and therefore… any relationship Sunny could build with her would inevitably be built on deceit. It would inevitably be unfair.

The only honest thing he could do for Nephis was leave and have no contact with her whatsoever.

But he…

Was unwilling to.

He had made a choice and lost her, but he selfishly wanted to be found by her.

And so, the only thing he could do was lie.

Sunny lingered for a moment, then leaned forward and placed his hand on hers.

Raising his head, he looked into her eyes and asked, his voice even:

"Lady Nephis… will you go on a date with me?"

She met his gaze silently.

Her silence felt quite terrifying… but Sunny couldn't help but notice something.

It was that she made no attempt to pull back her hand.

There was hope.

Eventually, the corners of Neph's mouth curled upward.

"...Alright."

Sunny blinked.

He couldn't quite process that answer just yet.

Failing to hide his surprise, he squeezed her hand lightly.

"Just… just like that?"

Nephis smiled and shrugged.

"Why not? I am… not that experienced in these matters, but we are both adults. We both know what we want. So why not?"

Why did she agree?

Because she wanted to...

Sunny took a deep breath, then let go of her hand and leaned back.

His heart was beating wildly, but he forcefully suppressed his excitement.

He remained silent for a while, looking away, then said neutrally:

"Actually, there are a lot of reasons why not."

He glanced at the untouched food, considered his next words carefully, and looked at her again.

This time, there was no smile on his face.

"Lady Nephis… before we go any further, I must admit something. Actually, I am not an honest person. In fact, I am a habitual liar… I am keeping many things from you, and might never reveal these secrets. This kind and harmless persona of mine is just a facade I wear because it's convenient. In truth, I am not that harmless. I am not very kind, either."

She stared at him silently for a few moments, then shrugged.

"I know."

Sunny's eyes widened a little.

"You... know?"

Nephis watched him for a few moments and sighed.

"You are a Master and a veteran of the Southern Campaign. A person like you can't be harmless, really. There was that duel, as well… I figured that you were putting up a front at some point. But I don't mind."

She looked at him without a smile and added, her voice revealing a hint of vulnerability:

"Actually… I'm not an honest person either. I am keeping many secrets from you, as well. This valiant and noble persona of a selfless hero you see is just a facade I wear because it's convenient. I am neither noble nor a hero. Most of all, I am not selfless at all. In truth, I might be the most selfish person in the world."

Nephis looked down and added quietly:

"So, I don't mind. As long as you don't."

Sunny stared at her in a daze.

"But… I might never be entirely honest with you. Aren't you wary of a liar?"

She looked up at him and smiled.

"Do you harbor secret malice toward me?"

He silently shook his head.

"Do you serve one of my enemies?"

Sunny shook his head once again.

"Are you planning to betray me?"

He frowned.

"Not really. Not at all."

Nephis shrugged.

"Then I don't care."

However, a moment later, her eyes suddenly widened.

"Wait! You… you don't have a wife and children somewhere out there already, do you? If you do… I'm afraid that is one thing I do have to know!"

Sunny flinched and looked at her in dismay.

"What?! No… no, I don't!"

Nephis visibly relaxed.

"That is… good. Then, as I was saying. I don't care."

She hesitated for a moment, and then added:

"Everyone has secrets. I have my share, as well… much more secrets than most people do, and more dire ones as well. So, I also must admit something before you decide if you want to go any further, Master Sunless."

Sunny was still a little dazed. This conversation… was not going how he had expected it to go, at all!

It was all too unexpected.

He looked at Nephis, composed himself, and asked calmly:

"What's that?"

She inhaled deeply.

"First of all… it might be premature to speak of this right now, but I feel like I should let you know before anything more meaningful has a chance to happen. I am… a very ambitious woman, Master Sunless. My heart is full of ambition, so much so that there's little space for anything — or anyone — left in it.

We might spend a few days together and part ways, or we might end up deciding to enjoy each other's company for much longer. But you… you will never own my heart, Master Sunless, or even most of my heart. It's only fair to warn you in advance."

Sunny had long known about Neph's insane goal, so he didn't react strongly to her words.

Instead, he nodded simply.

"I figured as much."

Nephis studied his face, hesitated for a few moments, and sighed.

"That is good. I see. Well, then, the second thing. You might not know, but my Aspect is closely tied to longing and passion. In fact, one of the reasons I was willing to indulge in this pretense relationship with you, at the beginning, was that I wanted to understand passion better. Later, I found myself sincerely enjoying your company, so… well, that is beside the point.

What I wanted to say is that I am sensitive to yearning, desire, and passion. I can perceive what other people want, and how much they want it."

She looked away with a hint of embarrassment on her beautiful face and added evenly:

"It's one of the reasons why I am saying yes. Because I can feel the nature and sincerity of your desire."

Sunny stared at her silently for a long time.

His eyes were a little glassy.

Then, he slowly picked up his wine.

"Lady Nephis… that… what kind of desire are we talking about, exactly?"

She kept looking at the wall, as if incredibly interested in the artwork.

"...All kinds. I can sense it all. Especially if it's aimed at me."

The glass cracked slightly in Sunny's hand.

His face remained absolutely impassive.

'So… earlier, when I was staring at her body… she knew exactly…'

Nephis turned his way and added with a hint of urgency in her voice:

"But… but you don't have to be embarrassed! It's perfectly normal. You… you are a healthy man, after all."

Sunny let out a heavy sigh.

"Lady Nephis…"

She blinked a couple of times.

"Yes?"

His voice was a little somber when he responded:

"Please don't speak for a few moments…"

With that, Sunny brought the cracked glass to his lips and gulped all the remaining wine down in one go.

Then, maintaining perfect composure, he reached for the wine bottle with a trembling hand.

Nephis observed his actions helplessly.

She sighed, then said in a placid tone:

"In short… yes. I will go on a real date with you, Master Sunless. I'll be delighted to."

Chapter-1775: Knight Commander

It was already getting dark when Sunny and Nephis returned to the Brilliant Emporium.

The rest of the dinner in the upscale restaurant had been uneventful. They had agreed to turn their pretend relationship into a real one — or at least try to. However, neither of them wanted for their first actual date to happen right there and then, in a place carefully prepared by someone else to create a false impression of how they felt about each other.

Sunny wanted to be the one making plans, at least, considering that he was the person who had invited Nephis on a date.

So, they enjoyed the food and discussed the play, both failing to hold back an occasional smile. Then, Nephis walked him home. Neither talked much on the way, but the silence wasn't awkward. Instead, it was comfortable and pleasant, full of unspoken potential.

Finally, they reached the quiet street where the Brilliant Emporium was located. The lake was just beyond the cottage.

Sunny and Nephis stopped near the porch. The sun was rolling behind the horizon, washing the world in the fiery blaze of its last rays. All throughout Bastion, shadows crawled from the dark corners, shrouding the city in twilight. Sunny was standing in the shade cast by the walls of the cottage, while Nephis was in the light, her striking grey eyes reflecting the splendor of the sunset.

She smiled faintly.

"...I will see you soon, then. Thank you for today, Master Sunless."

He bowed elegantly and answered with a smile of his own:

"I'll be counting the days until our next meeting, Lady Nephis."

She hesitated for a moment, then took a step back. The cascading sunlight shone radiantly behind her, forming into two beautiful white wings.

Nephis was ready to return to her heavenly palace.

Before that, however…

She lingered, then suddenly took a step forward and stopped right in front of Sunny. Before he could understand what was happening, Nephis raised her hands, placed them on his shoulders, and pulled him into a tight hug.

Sunny's eyes widened. He was so startled by her actions that his mind refused to process what was happening. He just knew that he felt a lot of things… the warmth of her touch, the firmness of her embrace, the softness of her body…

A few moments later, Nephis let him go and drew back.

Sunny looked at her dazedly.

"What... was that for?"

She met his gaze and smiled slightly.

"Just something I've been wanting to do."

With that, she bent down a little.

Her soft lips touched his cheek lightly, which made Sunny's whole body shudder. The spot where she had kissed him seemed to be on fire. No, his entire being was.

'Damn it… she can sense exactly what kind of reaction she's having on me, can't she? That's... that's unfair!'

Nephis looked him in the eyes for a moment, then chuckled.

"And that is just something for you to think about while you are counting days!"

She backed away, then turned and pushed herself off the ground. Soon, her graceful figure disappeared in the radiance of the setting sun.

Sunny belatedly raised a hand and covered his burning cheek.

Some time later, a heavy sigh escaped from his lips.

'She's either very cruel… or doesn't understand passion nearly as well as she thinks she does…'

A cold shower. That was what he needed now!

Turning around, Sunny hid a wide smile behind his hand and walked toward the door.

That... had been really unexpected.

'No, but when did she become so cool?'

Humming a simple melody, he entered the Brilliant Emporium. Sunny was so lost in thought that he didn't notice someone standing there, looking at him with wide eyes.

He only came to his senses when he heard them speak.

"...Wow."

Startled, Sunny finally noticed Aiko, who had been wiping the tables near the street side windows.

'Crap.'

Had she seen it all?

The petite girl stared at Sunny for a few moments, then slowly extended a tiny fist and raised her thumb.

"Boss… I admire you, boss! Good job! You work so fast!"

Sunny's expression collapsed.

He remained silent for a split second, then said in an even tone:

"Aiko, come here. Don't worry, I'll make it quick. It won't hurt at all…"

Soon, the sounds of something overturning and falling to the floor could be heard inside the Brilliant Emporium.

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Nephis landed gracefully on the emerald grass of the Ivory Island. Her wings disappeared, and with them, the pain tormenting her receded, as well.

She took a deep breath, raised her head slightly, and headed to the tower. There were Fire Keepers busy with various errands here and there, and even more of them inside the great pagoda.

She answered to their greetings with curt nods, her face the usual inexpressive mask of steady confidence.

Just like that, she reached her personal quarters on the highest level of the Ivory Tower, entered them, and closed the door behind her.

A moment later, Nephis let out a shaky breath, leaned on the door, and covered her face with both hands.

Her cheeks turned an alarming shade of red all of a sudden.

"Ah! What did I do?! I'm crazy! I've actually lost my mind!"

Her voice was full of torment.

She was in the middle of having a miniature breakdown when a soft hand patted her reassuringly on the shoulder.

Nephis flinched and looked up, finally noticing Cassie, who was standing there with a bright smile on the delicate face.

The smile slowly turned into a grin.

"Don't be too hard on yourself, Neph. I think you did great!"

'Oh, gods… Cassie saw it all, didn't she?'

Nephis was suddenly mortified.

The blind seer remained mercifully quiet for a few moments, then added in a familiar deadpan tone:

"And that is just something for you to think about while you are counting days… ah, what a line! Even I was almost seduced, poor Master Sunless must have collapsed into a puddle as soon as you left… I didn't know you had it in you..."

A low groan escaped from Neph's mouth.

"It's… it's all your fault, you wicked woman! If you hadn't been whispering into my ear, I would not have… I would have… it wouldn't have happened this way!"

Cassie squeezed her shoulder one more time and laughed.

"What? What are you blaming me for? I think it all went well…"

Nephis closed her eyes.

'Why am I reacting so strongly? There's a damn war approaching. There are more important things to worry about!'

She had been glad to be distracted from her burdensome responsibilities in the morning.

Who knew she would be a little bit too distracted by evening?

'Ah… I'm in trouble…'

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Unbeknownst to Sunny and Nephis, there were more repercussions to their actions that day.

Across the lake from the Brilliant Emporium, in the depths of the Castle, the elders of Clan Valor were having a strategic meeting.

They, too, were preparing for war.

At some point, the door opened, and a short report was placed in front of a regal middle-aged woman. She read it briefly and sighed.

An old man with harsh eyes and a grey beard looked at her sternly.

"What is it?"

The woman pursed her lips.

"There is another report on Changing Star and that… Mongrel person. It appears that the girl is truly taken with him."

The rest of the elders all showed a reaction, most of them displaying some sign of displeasure.

The stern old man shook his head.

"That won't do. She doesn't have to offer herself for a strategic marriage, but spending time frivolously with some nobody… a princess of Valor can't be tied to a person with no background. This concerns the prestige of our great clan."

The woman raised an eyebrow.

"What do you suggest we do? Reprimand her? Or remove the man from the picture? These are delicate matters. Will you take responsibility?"

There was a long silence in the chamber, with no one daring to speak.

Eventually, the silence was broken by a frustrated sigh.

Everyone turned to look at a beautiful young woman with striking vermilion eyes who sat at the head of the table.

Morgan looked at the elders with a frown, then shook her head dejectedly and said:

"Why are you creating a problem out of nothing? Do you have a lot of

time to waste?"

She glared at them for a few moments, then leaned back.

"I agree, Nephis can't be seen dating a nobody. So, what's the problem? Let's just knight that guy and be done with it. He won't be a nobody if we make him a Knight of Valor, will he? Hell, we can even put him in charge of some soldiers. There, problem solved."

The elders simply stared at her incredulously.

Morgan smiled.

"I see there are no objections. Let's proceed with this plan, then. Now, about the issue with Saint Thane, he'll be arriving soon…"

And that…

Was how Sunny became an honorary Knight Commander of the Great Clan Valor.

Even if he did not know it yet.

Chapter-1776: Working Dead

'So tired…'

Rain was sprawled on her threadbare sleeping bag, staring at the slanted roof of her modest tent. Outside, the noises of the construction camp were churning like a sea, just as loud as they had been throughout the day despite the late hour.

Out here, the work did not stop when the darkness fell.

For a very particular reason.

Rain had finished her long shift as a laborer, so her muscles were sore. Later, she crawled into her tent ready to pass out from fatigue, but instead of resting, she spent several hours arduously circulating her essence in an attempt to form a soul core.

That was something she did every night, and although there were no signs of Awakening yet, the number of tiny grains she had created was growing steadily.

Rain had only stopped after becoming completely exhausted.

And now, she couldn't fall asleep because of the noise outside.

'Ah, damnation… I really need to get out of this place…'

The construction of the Eastern Road was progressing at a startling pace. She had to stay hidden among the road crews for a while, but that did not mean that she had to remain in the main camp. There were other assignments available for those daring enough to take them — scouting parties, advanced camps, subjugation troops, and so on.

It was just that the number of slots for these jobs was limited, and

young mundane girls were not exactly at the top of the list for tough tasks.

Still, she wanted to leave the main construction camp as soon as possible.

It was not only cramped and noisy, but also a bit creepy.

That was because mundane laborers were not the only ones building the road. In fact, most of the work was being done…

By the dead.

Rain had not heard about anything like that happening in other construction crews, but the Eastern Road was special. Clan Song wanted it built very fast, for some reason, and so, the Queen had sent her personal servants to assist the builders.

The dead were dutiful workers. They never complained, never grew tired. They didn't need water or food. They just continued to build the road silently, without sleep or rest. Their frozen faces were calm and empty… men and women, young and old. Plenty of Nightmare Creatures were among them, as well, their monstrous eyes devoid of the usual frenzy.

Every time Rain left her tent early in the morning and saw the silent corpses working diligently in the dim light of dawn, she couldn't help but feel like she was in a strange, cold hell.

It was indeed very creepy… but people were very adaptable creatures. She observed the other laborers grow accustomed to the company of the dead with great speed.

She could understand them well. After all, the Queen's servants were doing the hard work that the laborers would have had to do themselves otherwise. The dead were also quiet, solemn, and never hurt anyone. All in all, as far as colleagues went, they weren't bad at all.

The unique culture of the Song Domain played a part in the speed with which the laborers had adapted to their presence, as well. Working side by side with the dead could have been terrifying if their

origin was mysterious and sinister. But they had been sent by the Queen, and the Queen was revered and beloved by the citizens of her kingdom.

So, anything that had come from the Queen was seen in a positive light.

Anyway…

"What the hell are you doing? Be quiet!"

Giving up her attempts to fall asleep, Rain turned her head and hissed at the darkness.

The darkness, which had been humming a joyful melody, grew silent.

Her teacher was in a strange mood these days. He was way too carefree and cheerful, even by his standards.

The ancient fiend must have felt at home in the company of creepy corpses. Rain couldn't explain the sudden shift in his behavior any other way.

The darkness remained silent for a while, then sighed reproachfully.

"You are such a killjoy."

Rain stared in the direction of the voice with indignation.

"Teacher… your poor student is trying to sleep here. After working a long, arduous shift in the cold. And being fed tasteless slop by the camp wardens. Can't you go hum somewhere else?"

He chuckled.

"I can. But I don't want to… that woman is there, and she might see me."

Rain frowned.

'That woman?'

Was he talking about Saint Seishan, the overseer of the camp?

Teacher seemed to be wary of the Queen's daughter…

Which was a bit strange. Ki Song did not have biological children, but she had raised many orphan girls. Among them, seven were now Saints, each possessing enchanting beauty and startling powers. The Queen's daughters were venerated and loved by the people of the Song Domain almost as much as their mother was.

Rain's teacher did not show any reaction at the mention of the more famous of them, like Beastmaster or Silent Stalker, even joking about having had questionable relationships with them… but the more obscure of the Queen's daughters, Song Seishan, caused him to behave strangely.

Rain sighed.

"Why? What did you do… no, let me guess. Did you abandon her at the altar? It was something like that, wasn't it?"

Her teacher laughed quietly.

"What? No, nothing like that… it's just that when I was a young shadow, and she was going around devouring naughty youths, we crossed paths a few times, and it seemed like she was able to see me."

Rain did not know what to say.

'Can he at least try to be consistent with his lies? He said on multiple occasions that he's thousands of years old… so how could Saint Seishan have been there when that bastard was young? And what is that about devouring youths? I can believe that he has devoured a fair share of children, but Lady Seishan? Ridiculous!'

She sighed.

"In any case. Stop humming and let me sleep. I need to get up early if I want to snatch an assignment at one of the advanced camps… I hear they'll be establishing a new one this week."

Her teacher scoffed.

"Fine, fine. Go to sleep, then. Oh, and by the way... don't worry. I

managed to get a message to your family in Ravenheart. They know that you're safe.

Well… that you are alive, at least."

Rain's eyes widened in the darkness.

"Really?"

He sighed.

"Really."

A smile appeared on her lips, and a palpable sense of relief spread in her chest. A heavy burden that she had been carrying was suddenly gone.

Her poor parents must have been so worried!

"Really, really?"

Her teacher cursed quietly.

"Yes! Listen… I am a very honest person. The most honest person in two worlds, even! When have I ever lied to you?"

She laughed quietly and turned on her side, finally closing her eyes.

'Yeah, sure… that statement is full of holes. Not only are you the most brazen liar I have ever met, it's even a question if you are a person.'

Rain relaxed, feeling sleep finally starting to envelop her mind in a soft embrace.

'But it's alright… tonight, I'll forgive you… thank you, teacher!'

Relieved and warmed by the news he had shared, she peacefully fell asleep.

Tomorrow, she was going to find a way to leave the main camp.

Chapter-1777: Hell on Wheels

In the morning, Rain crawled out of her tent feeling rested and refreshed. The sun had barely shown itself, rising above the distant horizon in all its pale glory — the world was still shrouded in darkness, but at least one could see where they were going.

One of the first things Rain had noticed after coming to Ravenheart was how darker the nights were in the Dream Realm, compared to NQSC. Out there in the waking world, humanity had long defeated and banished darkness from their homes, but here, it was still a tyrannical enemy.

'Ah… how cold.'

The main construction camp was already a hive of activity. The dead continued to toil silently in the distance, the sound of their tireless work reaching the small tent settlement like a persistent tide. By now, the road had extended far beyond the defensive palisade, so the whole camp would have to be moved soon — the road crews were nomadic in nature, following the roads they built.

The night shift laborers were returning to their tents, while those assigned to the day shift, like her, were waking up. The Awakened warriors guarding the camp were out on patrol. Food was being prepared, and oil lanterns were being put out.

Everyone was getting ready for a new day of work.

Rain yawned, rubbed her eyes, and walked slowly to the communal washroom.

Mercifully enough, the female laborers had a separate space to maintain hygiene, and since most of the hired laborers consisted of men, it was not too overcrowded. Still, there were whispers behind her back — Rain's body, after all, was a sight to behold… meaning

that it was a bit scary to see, since she had never gotten the chance to visit a healer after slaying the Huntsman.

The bruises had mostly faded by now, but during her first few days on the road crew, her skin was as black and blue as it was fair and white. The bandages she wore to cover the cut on her side weren't bloody anymore, either. The female laborers were more relaxed around her, but still a little wary.

Rain washed her face, brushed her teeth, and shivered miserably from the cold for a while. Then, wide awake, she returned to her tent and put her jacket on.

The breakfast was just as tasteless as the supper had been, but at least it was prepared from actual ingredients, not synthpaste — the volcanic soil around Ravenheart was extremely fertile, so the harvests from the fields were enough to not only feed the entire city, but also supply the other settlements of the Song Domain with food.

Rain ate in solitude, since no one was brave enough to approach her. The male laborers often threw furtive glances her way, but shyly kept their distance. She did not know what was so frightening about her, really… maybe it was the sharp and feral aura of an abomination hunter, or the dark circles that were constantly under her eyes because of the lack of sleep.

She didn't mind sitting alone in the canteen, anyway. At least it gave her the chance to converse secretly with her teacher.

"Listen, Rain… I know that killing people is generally frowned upon. But if you want to strangle the sorry excuse for a cook they have in charge of the camp kitchen, I won't judge…"

Rain raised a tin cup, hiding her lips behind it, and answered quietly:

"Is that something you should be teaching your student, teacher? How to murder people?"

Her shadow remained silent for a while, then asked in a tone of confusion:

"Yes? What's wrong with a little murder?"

Rain exhaled slowly.

"I won't be killing the camp cook, thank you…"

Finishing her meal, she walked out of the canteen and headed for the crew management wagon.

On the way, Rain passed a team of tranquil corpses who were carrying sacks of gravel, once again feeling as if she had somehow ended up in hell. Then, she crossed the finished section of the road and paused for a few moments, looking down.

A small smile found its way onto her face.

Rain had enlisted as a road crew laborer out of necessity, but after spending some time at the wandering camp…

She realized that she liked it here a lot.

It was a bit magical, to see a beautiful road appear out of nowhere in the dreadful wilderness of the Dream Realm. Like watching order and the human spirit triumph over chaos.

The road itself was an engineering marvel, as well.

Rain's father worked for the government, dealing with the complicated logistics that went into making it function. He rarely brought his work home, and yet, she had a better understanding of how wondrous the infrastructure of the world was than most of her peers.

Before the Dark Times, humans often admired the so-called wonders of the world — grand structures that defied imagination. However, Rain was of the opinion that the greatest thing that humanity had built, by far, rarely received any attention.

It was the network of roads that used to connect all the cities of the waking world, enveloping it like a planet-sized spider web. The scale of it was almost unfathomable… and that was just the physical scale. The role it played for the infrastructure of the world, the amount of goods and people being transported over those roads every day, was even more unimaginable.

Of course, that era was long gone. Most of the waking world had been lost, and most of the roads that the humans had built were destroyed. These days, only a scattering of reinforced railroads and easily defendable highways remained, connecting the walled cities of humanity together.

There were fewer of them being used each year.

That was why Rain felt glad to have joined the road construction camp. The road was being built right in front of her eyes, and she found herself deeply excited by the building process. The engineering, the logistics, the problem solving… all of it was both fascinating and wonderful.

The wide cobbled road appearing as a palpable, undeniable result of it all was a joy to behold. Building things spoke to something buried deep in her heart.

It was sort of like the soul core that she was creating, one grain of sand at a time.

That was why Rain spent all of her free time — which there wasn't a lot of — observing every part of the construction process, from the way laborers were managed to the way the dead lay layers of sand, gravel, and crushed rock in the dug trench before cobblers got to work.

It was to the point that she was a little reluctant to leave the main construction camp behind, even if it resembled a wandering hell.

However…

There was more to building a road than simply constructing it. The other assignments were also part of the process. So, she was curious about them, too.

Enjoying the solid feel of the paved stones under her boots, Rain crossed the pristine road and entered the northern part of the camp.

It was much different from the chaotic settlement where the laborers lived. Here, the tents were much larger and more luxurious, and there were even a few semi-permanent buildings with wooden walls.

Everything seemed cleaner and more orderly.

That was where Awakened and the managers lived and worked.

The crew management office was actually a huge wagon with a two-level wooden building constructed on it. When the camp migrated, it was pulled along the newly constructed section of the road by two enormous Echoes, but now that the camp was stationary, the wagon was simply standing there.

Rain took a deep breath.

'Hopefully, I can get a new assignment today!'

She was quite hopeful.

Chapter-1778: Survey Team

A familiar road manager was leaning on the side of the wagon, drinking a cup of coffee and watching the sun rise. Noticing Rain, he spared her a crooked smile.

"Ah. It's you again, Rani."

Rain almost stumbled.

'Damn.'

Rani is what she was known as on the road crew. Since she was hiding here, using her own name would have been silly… the problem was that Rain had not thought about that right until the moment she was asked to introduce herself.

So, put on the spot, she had failed to come up with anything and mumbled the first thing that entered her mind.

Which was why her teacher had mocked her relentlessly for a whole week.

"No, really? Rani? The best you could do was shift two letters around? I just can't… gods, everything I've been through, and I'll die of laughter…"

Rain had endured the mockery for as long as she could, and then kindly reminded her teacher that he went around calling himself Shadow.

So, he wasn't in a position to critique her naming sense, was he?

That, luckily, had shut him up.

In any case, by now, she was more or less accustomed to responding to "Rani".

Which was not to say that she wasn't embarrassed every time she heard it.

"Good morning, Chief."

The man stared at her for a few moments, then sighed.

"Listen, Rani… I get it, the pay in the advanced camps is higher. But what's the use of having money if you are dead? It's quite dangerous out there, you know! A young girl like you should just stay here in the main camp. Actually, even the main camp is not a good place. If my daughter wanted to come here from Ravenheart, I would have locked her up."

He took a sip of coffee and shook his head.

"Why don't you change your mind?"

Rain gave him her best smile.

"Still, Chief… I hear they are establishing a new camp soon. Please reassign me."

He grimaced.

"I'm sorry. Actually, all the spots are already filled… it's a tough job, especially now that we are so far away from Ravenheart. We have strict orders to prioritize the strongest and most resilient recruits for these postings."

Seeing that her expression fell, the manager hesitated for a few moments, then let out a heavy sigh.

"Okay, okay… I'll help you out. Just don't pout."

Rain blinked a couple of times.

"I… I'm not pouting!"

The man laughed.

"Sure, right. Anyway, I can't get you a spot in an advanced camp, but

if you just want to get out of the main construction crew and make some extra money, there's another assignment coming up."

Her eyes glistened.

"Really?"

He looked around cautiously, then leaned forward a little:

"I'm only telling you this because you're a good kid and might be suitable for the task. There's a new survey team being formed. The core of the team are Awakened warriors, of course, but they need mundane porters, as well as someone to tend to their daily needs… wash the dishes, patch up tents, stuff like that."

The manager paused for a moment, then added quietly:

"Since survey teams are small and can move freely, it's not as dangerous as staying at an advanced camp. Usually, I would still recommend strong men for the position, but this team is a bit special. It is actually run by a young lady from a Legacy Clan, so… I thought that having a girl of similar age there would be of help."

He looked at Rain and smiled:

"Play your cards right, Rani, and you might even end up as a retainer of the Legacy clan! Legacies can be snobbish, but still. It's a good opportunity for simple folk like us."

She hesitated for a moment, then grinned.

"Survey team? That's great! Thank you, Chief!"

Survey teams were just what they sounded like — they were small reconnaissance groups exploring the wilderness to map out the best route for the road to take. Of course, the nature of the job was quite peculiar here in the Dream Realm, where different regions could have entirely different terrain, climate, geology, sky, and even unique laws of physics.

More than that, the survey teams were not only meant to study the landscape, but also to scout out the Nightmare Creatures populating

it. If there were especially dangerous abominations ahead, the road would be rerouted to avoid their hunting grounds.

Rain's grin wavered a little.

The road manager meant well… but he clearly knew close to nothing about the Dream Realm. A survey team seemed like a safer bet to him, but actually, there was probably no assignment more dangerous in the road crew.

No wonder they put an actual Legacy in charge of it.

Still… Rain could take care of herself better than any other mundane person here. Plus, being on a survey team was even better for her than running to an advanced camp — the fewer people were around her, the lesser was the possibility of being discovered.

So, this opportunity was a godsend.

Rain gave the road manager a thumbs-up.

"I won't forget it! I'll treat you to something nice once my team returns, Chief!"

The man chuckled.

"Yeah, yeah. Just return in one piece, girl… that will be the best gratitude."

With that, he pointed her to a certain tent in the northern part of the camp and said wistfully:

"Go gather your things and report there by the time the morning shift is supposed to start work. I'll do the paperwork by then."

Rain thanked the road manager and turned to leave. As she was walking away, he called out to her.

"May the Queen's grace protect you!"

She halted for a moment.

"Uh… yeah. Thanks. You too!"

It felt weird to see how readily the settlers accepted Queen Song as not only their ruler, but also a… a surrogate goddess, of sorts. Sure, the Sovereigns possessed unimaginable power — Saints were already called demigods at times, and the Supremes were far above them in all regards.

But, still… Ki Song was just a human, just like the rest of them. So was the King of Swords. Watching people treat them with religious zeal made Rain a little uncomfortable.

She wasn't really sure why, since most of them were still good people. It was just that there was an inevitable element of surrendering your own judgment when one acted with blind faith… and if you followed someone blindly, who was to say that they would not lead you into a dark place?

On the other hand, perhaps it was only logical that the people of the Song Domain treated their Queen as a deity. Most of them were only alive because of her grace, after all, and would be swallowed by the Nightmare Spell without her. From the point of view of a mundane person, her vast power would indeed seem godlike.

Gathering her pack, Rain asked thoughtfully:

"Teacher… can a person become a god?"

Her shadow moved slightly.

"That's an unexpected question."

He lingered for a few moments, then said neutrally:

"Sure. It's possible."

Rain continued to gather her things, thinking that his answer was over.

But then, her teacher added suddenly:

"Not only is it possible, it is also necessary."

Rain stopped what she was doing and looked at her shadow in surprise.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He remained silent for a while, then laughed.

"It means just that. Why, do you feel insecure? Alright, alright… I won't insist that you become a goddess… just yet. But honestly, for a student of mine to aim any lower is a bit shameful…"

She stared at the shadow for a while, then scoffed and turned back to her pack.

"...Why did I even ask?!"

Rain was pretty sure that becoming a deity was not in the cards for her.

However, with such a teacher... she definitely had a chance of developing divine patience.

Chapter-1779: Leaving the Main Camp

Rain was used to spending time in the wilderness, so it did not take her a long time to pack her things and take down the tent. Her bow was unstrung and attached to the pack, and so were her quiver and sword — usually, she would have kept the weapons on the ready, but since there would be a cohort of Awakened leading the survey team, it was better to keep a low profile.

There weren't a lot of mundane people who habitually hunted Nightmare Creatures, and since Rain was supposed to be hiding, she didn't want to attract undue attention.

Saying goodbye to the few acquaintances she had made in the main camp, she hurried to the tent the road manager had mentioned.

Rain felt both relieved and a little wistful, knowing that she might never see this place again.

As she was nearing the large tent, there was the sound of several voices. Her teacher suddenly mumbled something from the shadows:

"No, it can't be… can it? Curses, it is! Damn, I knew this would happen!"

He sounded alarmed.

She slowed down and stared at her shadow in confusion.

"Teacher, is something the matter?"

He remained silent for a few moments, then said in a grave tone:

"Rain, I need you to listen to me very carefully."

She tensed, overcome by sudden fear.

Her teacher, meanwhile, continued somberly:

"There is a guy named Ray in that tent. Keep away from him… at all costs! Don't talk to him, don't listen to him… better yet, don't even look at him. Treat him like he has the plague. Do you understand? Nod if you understand!"

Rain stared at her shadow in bewilderment.

"W—why? Is he some kind of terrible fiend? Is he v—very dangerous?"

Her shadow stirred.

"Yes! Very, very dangerous! And he is something way worse than a terrible fiend…"

His voice shook with some dark, chilling emotion.

"...He's a male teenager! So, keep your distance, alright? Nod if you understand!"

Rain blinked a couple of times.

'Huh?'

"Huh?"

Her teacher hissed.

"What are you spacing out for? I said to nod if you understood. Why aren't you nodding?"

She took a deep breath, holding back many unflattering words.

"What on earth, teacher… you scared the hell out of me."

He scoffed derisively.

"You should be scared! A guy like that is a deadly threat for sheltered young ladies."

Rain remained silent for a while, then looked down at herself.

Rugged leather clothes, a body covered by bruises, dirty bandages hiding a barely healed cut on her side, calloused hands…

Where were these sheltered young ladies her teacher was talking about?

Shaking her head, she exhaled slowly and resumed walking.

"Got it. I'll keep that in mind."

'Crazy bastard.'

Her shadow followed.

"Hey! I didn't see you nod!"

Ignoring him, Rain approached the tent, knocked on the door post, and entered.

The spacious tent was a completely different beast from her own. The tent Rain used was meant for one person to sleep in, while this one was basically a small building. There were several compartments, field furniture, and one could stand inside without bending their back.

At the moment, there were about a dozen mundane humans gathered near the entrance, all laborers like her — most of them were men, but there were a couple tough-looking women as well.

In the open space in front of them, four people were having a quiet conversation. Rain didn't need to look twice to know that they were Awakened.

One was a delicate young woman with fair skin and red hair, wearing a beautiful silk robe. One was a young man in leather armor, who was leaning on a table with a sullen expression. The third one… was clearly the Legacy.

She was a young woman with tan skin and strange ashen hair, wearing an intricate suit of full plate armor forged from lustrous

steel. Her expression was serious, and her gaze was sharp.

Of course, all three were undeniably gorgeous, like all Awakened were.

It was the fourth person that drew all attention, though.

Rain held her breath.

There, in front of her, a stunningly beautiful woman in modest red garments was addressing the young Legacy… a Master. And not just any Master, but one of the Blood Sisters — an elite group of Ascended who served Saint Seishan, and had come from the Forgotten Shore with her.

She was saying in a husky tone:

"...time is of the essence, Lady Tamar. However, you must be careful. Do not get too close to the Hand, and whatever you do, do not cross the realm boundary. You should know the consequences. Be well, and I hope to see you again in two weeks."

The Legacy nodded.

"With the maps you provided, there should not be any problem. Please relay my gratitude to the Saint."

The beautiful Master bowed slightly and left, not sparing the mundane humans even a glance.

There were a few moments of silence, and then, the Legacy turned to them. Her expression seemed dark.

'Gods…'

She was a baby!

All three of them were. None of the three Awakened was older than eighteen… Rain wasn't that far in terms of age, but she felt old and wizened when looking at them.

The Legacy frowned, then said coldly:

"I am Tamar of Sorrow. These are my companions, Awakened Ray and Awakened Fleur. You should have been told about the nature of the task… our goal is to conduct the final survey of the environment for the last stretch of the Eastern Road. We will depart in two hours."

Rain studied Lady Tamar with curiosity. She didn't seem especially mean, but definitely had a severe personality. Although… considering her age, she must have just Awakened recently. This survey was most likely the first mission she had received as an Awakened, so the young Legacy was definitely under tremendous pressure to perform well. Perhaps that was the reason for her harshness.

'Great.'

Well, it didn't matter too much. Rain was not planning on following the road manager's advice to gain the girl's friendship and affection during the journey — she did not need another benefactor. In fact, dealing with the one she had was already testing the limits of her patience.

It was far more likely that she would barely exchange a few words with the proud Legacy in the next few weeks.

Awakened Tamar, meanwhile, briefly addressed each of the mundane laborers to learn their names and evaluate their character.

She reached Rain last and stopped in front of her.

"Name?"

Rain answered respectfully without looking the Legacy in the eyes:

"Rani."

At that, Tamar was supposed to move on.

However, she lingered for a moment and looked at Rain's pack.

Then, she asked unexpectedly:

"How good are you with that bow?"

Rain finally looked directly at the leader of the survey team and smiled faintly.

"I'm decent."

The Legacy frowned.

"What about that sword?"

For a moment, Rain had a ridiculous thought of saying something outrageous, like that she was probably a better swordsman than the three of the young Awakened combined.

For some unknown reason, she wanted to brag when stared down by the beautiful Legacy girl.

Instead, she said simply:

"I can handle it fine."

Finally, Tamar studied her clothes.

"Do you have experience trekking in the wilderness?"

Rain nodded.

"Some."

The Awakened girl sighed, then finally looked away.

"Good. I was wondering why they sent someone that young, but it seems that you are not completely helpless… Rani. Don't slow us down."

Rain suddenly wanted to laugh.

How could that baby-faced Awakened call someone too young with a straight face? Legacy training was something else, indeed!

Of course, she didn't laugh.

Instead, she bowed slightly.

"Ah, yes, Lady Tamar. I'll do my best."

Two hours later, they departed the main camp and set out into the wilderness.

Chapter-1780: Moonriver Plain

The Eastern Road had been built incredibly fast. By now, it reached far from Ravenheart, entering a new region of the Dream Realm.

The mountains were out of sight, and there was no ash falling from the sky. There was no human presence, either — the barren wasteland stretched as far as the eye could see, with rolling hills and deep canyons breaking the landscape here and there.

Sometimes, without any warning, the deep canyons would suddenly let out a low, weeping roar. Then, they would overflow with rushing water and turn into countless rivers. Those rivers eventually merged far to the south, forming the Great Waterfall.

Since the cliffs of the waterfall resembled a beautiful face from a certain angle, especially under moonlight, it was also often called the Weeping Goddess.

That was where the Citadel of Clan Sorrow stood.

Clan Sorrow was an old one, and held a special position in the Song Domain — that was because the lake below the waterfall, known as the Lake of Tears, gave birth to a great river, which was similarly called the River of Tears. That river flowed through several regions of the Dream Realm, serving as a waterway for the Song Domain, while its estuary was on the dusky shores of the Stormsea.

Its significance had always been great, but now that isolated Citadels were turning into thriving cities, the importance of the River of Tears as the connective tissue of the Song Domain was impossible to underestimate.

The Citadel of Clan Sorrow was perched on the cliffs of the Great Waterfall, while the city it now governed was below it, on the shores of the Lake of Tears. It was now an important logistical hub…

Well, at least that was what Rain had heard. She had never been there herself, of course.

In any case, the great waterfall and the homestead of young Lady Tamar were far to the south. What concerned Rain now were the deep canyons they had to cross.

The area they were traversing was an inhospitable place. The soil was rocky, and the sun was small and distant. There was little snow, but the air was frigid and cold. There were ancient ruins here and there, rising from the ground like forlorn obelisks to the meaninglessness of life. All in all, it was a bleak land.

It transformed at night, though, because there were three beautiful moons illuminating the starlit sky. That was the first time Rain had seen such an alien sight, so she was both awed and impressed.

There was little time to enjoy the view, though, because the Moonriver Plain was quite dangerous.

This far from Ravenheart, the wilderness was not thoroughly tamed. There were plenty of Nightmare Creatures stalking the deep canyons and nesting in the old ruins. The terrain itself was treacherous, as well, because one had to be careful not to plummet into the cavernous fissures or be swept away by the sudden appearance of the rushing rivers.

There had been stone bridges built over the canyons once, but most of them long collapsed. The road crew would have to build new ones to lay down the road, which was why the construction had slowed down as of late.

Still… there was nothing but Death Zones east of the Moonriver Plain, so it wasn't hard to guess that the road crew would finish its work soon. Rain was still unclear on why Queen Song wanted to build a road to a dead end, but she was not in a position to ask questions.

In short, the survey team was struggling to make progress.

It consisted of a dozen mundane porters, several survey specialists,

three Awakened, one Ascended Echo, and one dead pilgrim.

Rain's job was to help push the carts with survey equipment during the day, and do camp chores at night. It could have been exhausting, but the constant need to cross the canyons gave her plenty of time to rest.

In fact, Rain might have been the most comfortable of the survey team members.

Everyone else was constantly suffering. Their boots were wet, their feet were blistered, they were either too cold or too hot, their bodies were tired from the strain of climbing over the canyons… but to her, it was like a relaxed walk. A vacation, really — doing construction work at the main camp had been much more exhausting.

Her clothes and equipment were perfectly suited for the journey due to her rich experience of hunting abominations in the wild. She was relaxed and comfortable, enjoying the forgiving pace and light responsibilities of a mundane porter.

There was no need to fight any Nightmare Creatures, even!

The few times the survey team was attacked, the three young Awakened had dealt with the danger confidently. Despite the small size of their cohort, they were well-matched to face the dangers of the Dream Realm.

The guy her teacher had warned her about, Ray, could hide his presence and even turn invisible. That alone allowed them to deal with most abominations safely.

Young Lady Tamar, meanwhile, possessed a powerful combat Aspect and served as the bulwark of the small cohort. Her Memories were also of a higher quality than most Awakened would have access to, which helped her excel in her role as a melee specialist.

The delicate girl, Fleur, was even a healer. Her Dormant Aspect Ability could alleviate fatigue, while her Awakened Ability could stem bleeding and speed up the healing process.

And when the three faced something out of their league, the

Ascended Echo was there to level the playing field.

The Echo looked like a giant, monstrous wolf, and was a gift Tamar had received from her clan. Rain wasn't sure about the Class of the creature, but it seemed ferocious enough to deal with most threats they had faced so far.

So, Rain could just relax and enjoy her role as a helpless mundane girl.

Of course, she continued to work on her soul core at night.

By now, controlling her essence had become quite familiar to her. She was also constantly practicing to make her control more fine and precise… turning the flow of essence into a raging whirlpool was still hard and exhausting, both physically and mentally, but she wasn't as drained after each meditation as she had been before.

She could also feel her body slowly growing stronger, as if benefitting from the constant flow of essence. It was a tiny difference, but a rewarding one, since it indicated that she was making progress.

If there was one thing Rain felt worried about, it was her teacher.

Although he didn't really show it, she could tell that he was tense, for some reason. He hid deeply in her shadow and didn't talk much, especially when the dead pilgrim was close by, but more than that… when he did speak, he tried to hurry her more insistently than ever before.

It was as though her Awakening was suddenly an urgent matter.

'I'm already trying as hard as I can…'

Feeling sullen, Rain pushed one of the carts across the barren wasteland. The day was coming to an end, so they would stop soon.

And just as she thought about it, Awakened Fleur commanded the survey team to stop.

She looked ahead, where another canyon barred their way, and sighed.

"We will camp here tonight."

Chapter-1781: Don't Shoot the Messenger

There were food rations in one of the carts, but Lady Tamar had also slain an Awakened Monster in the morning. There had been enough time for Rain to harvest a slab of meat before the survey team continued on its journey, so now, she was ready to cook a delicious supper.

Although the team wasn't big, there was a clear separation between people. The Awakened mostly kept to themselves, the survey specialists did the same, and the porters generally stuck together.

Right now, they were gathered around a fire, watching Rain roast meat with gleaming eyes.

"Wait, wait, everyone… it will be done soon! We're having a feast tonight!"

She grinned and turned the juicy strips of meat, making the melted fat sizzle. A delicious aroma permeated the air.

One of the laborers laughed.

"Rani, kid… if I was thirty years younger, I would have married you right here and now. No questions asked."

One of the tough women from the road crew gave him a disdainful look.

"Old goat, what makes you think that you would have been worthy of marrying our Rani? Dream on!"

She put her hand around Rain's shoulder protectively.

"On that note, though… I know for a fact that you have a bottle of arak hidden in your pack. Come on, bring it out…"

The mood was light and warm. Rain was the youngest of the laborers, so they treated her with a bit of affection. The women especially tried to take care of her like concerned aunts.

So, feeding them today was her way of returning the favor.

While the man went to take out the bottle of moonshine from his pack, the woman let go of Rain and looked at the sizzling meat hungrily.

Then, she said in a tone of confusion:

"I must say, though… that's a peculiar pan you have there, Rani."

Rain grinned.

"Yeah? You think so, auntie?"

Well, it was true. After all, she was using the blade of the Huntsman's axe as a makeshift pan.

The thing was too heavy to use in battle and too precious to discard. However, it was just large enough to place over a fire… the green metal was slow to heat up, but cooked meat beautifully. So, she used it often to prepare her meals.

Rain clicked her tongue.

"It used to be a demon's weapon. A handy thing to have — doesn't rust, easy to wash, and I can split firewood with it at the same time. I was so lucky to pick it up!"

The laborers laughed.

By the time the first portion of the meat was ready, even the survey specialists were looking at them with envy. Rain passed the strips of meat around and placed the second portion on the green axe.

There was food, a bit of alcohol, and a warm fire. The three moons

shone beautifully in the night sky, and the mundane humans huddled together in the circle of light, trying to distract themselves from the fear of the wilderness with conversation.

"Hey, Pill… you only arrived from Ravenheart two days before we departed the main camp, didn't you? What did you do before?"

A bearded man with harsh eyes scratched the back of his head.

"Before? Ah, well… I was an air filtration tech back in Antarctica. No need to filter air in the Dream Realm, though, so I just worked construction here and there for the last few years."

He hesitated for a moment, then added with a sheepish smile.

"My wife and I wanted to save some coin, then move south and open a shop in one of the smaller cities, before they really developed. How great would it be, to have a store in a central location? But it's not easy to save. That's why I signed up for the road crew. The pay here is too sweet to pass up."

The others laughed.

"I used to be a civil engineer in Antarctica."

"I ran a small luxury PTV factory."

"Rich bastards, I was a floor cleaner in an underground facility in the outskirts of NQSC."

"What about you, Rani?"

Rain opened her eyes wide and fluttered her eyelashes

"Me? Oh… I went to school."

The laborers stared at her for a few moments, then laughed again.

"Gods, she's a baby…"

"How did such a precious girl end up on a road crew?"

"What do you mean, our Rani is tough as nails… tougher than the

bunch of us, at least!"

When the laughter died down, the woman who had hugged her before looked at the newcomer, Pill, and asked with curiosity:

"What's the latest news in Ravenheart, by the way?"

There were no communicators in the Dream Realm, so the common folk had no way of receiving information quickly. There was little entertainment, as well, and everyone suffered from boredom.

Having arrived from the capital of the Song Domain recently, Pill was understandably the center of attention.

However, he did not seem very excited despite the situation.

Sighing heavily, the bearded man shook his head.

"That… things aren't very good right now. I don't even know what to say. It's like everyone has gone crazy."

The laborers looked at him in confusion.

"What? Why? What happened?"

Rain listened with interest, as well.

Pill hesitated for a few moments.

"You must have heard that some psycho tried to kill Lady Changing Star, right? That was already terrible enough, but now… you won't believe it… those scumbags from the Sword Domain are trying to insinuate that it was the Queen who ordered it."

There was suddenly silence.

The laborers stared at the bearded man, their expressions a mixture of confusion, disbelief, and outrage.

"No…. no way. What are they, lunatics? Why would Her Majesty want to kill Lady Changing Star?"

"What the hell is going on in the Sword Domain?"

"You can't be serious, right?"

Pill let out another sigh.

"Yeah, I get it. It's ridiculous. Actually, everyone in Ravenheart is angry about that."

He paused for a few moments, then pursed his lips.

"But it's true. They actually had the gall to demand that Saint Silent Stalker and Master Dar of the Maharana Clan were handed to them. For 'interrogation'".

Chapter-1782: Heirs of War

Even Rain was stunned to hear that.

It was news to her that someone had tried to kill Lady Nephis. Was there really such an idiot in the world? That woman had survived the Forgotten Shore, conquered the Second Nightmare as a Sleeper, Transcended during the Chain of Nightmares, fought against Great abominations side by side with the King of Swords, and triumphed in countless terrible battles as a Saint.

There were literally only two people in two worlds who were harder to kill than her.

But the fact that Clan Valor was trying to openly accuse Clan Song of the assassination attempt was even crazier. Not only that, but they were asking the Queen to surrender one of her daughters and a Master from a vassal clan. There was no way that she would agree… what were the rulers of the Sword Domain thinking?

The whole situation seemed… incongruous. Rain had a feeling that she was dreaming, since reality simply couldn't be like that. It was just too irrational.

Then, a spark of anger ignited in her heart.

'Just which bastard tried to harm Lady Nephis? And who do these Valor people think they are, accusing the Song Domain of something that terrible?'

However, that spark of anger was quickly extinguished. She knew how rumors and propaganda worked, so she wouldn't allow her feelings to be manipulated that easily without knowing all the facts.

There was an unpleasant residue left in its wake, though. Rain was quite fond of Ravenheart and the people she knew there. Even

though she was a little distant from most because of her government family and the secret she was keeping, they were still her friends and neighbours. She felt like a part of a wonderful community...

it didn't feel nice to see that community being falsely accused of something appalling and dirty.

The rest of the laborers were even less composed. Their gazes grew darker.

"Those Valor bastards have lost their minds. How dare they try to take Lady Silent Stalker?"

"They've been trying to suppress our Song Domain from the very start. Do they think that we'll just roll over?"

"Gods, I never took those rumors seriously, but what if they had really been taken over by the Skinwalker?"

"Maybe Changing Star staged the whole thing herself…"

"No way! Lady Nephis would never participate in such a vile scheme!"

"But… but what if Skinwalker took her, too…"

"Silence!"

That last shout did not come from the laborers.

Turning slightly, Rain saw young Lady Tamar standing a few meters away, looking at them with a grim expression. Her eyes were so dark that it was a little scary.

The healer, Fleur, was standing behind her, trying to pull her away.

"Tamar, calm down… they didn't mean it."

But the Legacy simply ignored her attempts to discharge the situation and took a step forward.

Coming closer to their fire, Tamar studied them with a heavy look.

Her gaze lingered for a moment on the empty bottle of alcohol, and then, she shook her head.

"Do you think that you can just run your mouths freely?"

Her tone was harsh.

"You are people of the Song Domain. Everything you say reflects on the dignity of the Queen. Is it fun to slander people who selflessly fight for the safety and prosperity of humanity? Who gave you the right to throw baseless accusations?"

Pill, who had caused the entire outburst, coughed awkwardly.

"We… we are sorry, my lady. But the Sword Domain, they really went too far! It's not just us who feel that way. Everyone in Ravenheart is… well, people are offended."

Tamar stared at him silently for a moment, then scowled.

"You can have an opinion about Clan Valor. However… Lady Changing Star would have never done something like that. She is not a vessel of Skinwalker, either! So don't go around saying dirty things about her. Understand?"

The laborers seemed to shrink under her scathing gaze.

"Y—yes, my lady… we were wrong."

Fleur finally managed to drag Tamar away, and they relaxed a little.

After a bit of silence, one of them said:

"Still. Lady Changing Star is indeed righteous and honorable. But, hell… she might very well be the only decent person in the Sword Domain…"

"Yeah. Those people... damn, are they even people? I bet they were the ones who tried to kill her, to begin with."

"How terrible..."

Rain frowned and concentrating on roasting the meat.

Some time later, she crawled into her tent and lay silently in the darkness for a while, mustering mental strength to continue forming the soul core.

After a while, she asked quietly:

"Teacher… do you think Lady Nephis is alright?"

A subdued chuckle came from the darkness.

"Is she alright? You bet. Why, I just saw her recently… we went for a picnic, watched a play, and shared tender moments at sunset…"

Rain scoffed. She had no energy to react to his nonsense, though.

Eventually, she said:

"I… don't like where this is going. It has always been a bit strange how eagerly people villainized the Sword Domain. But, how can I put it? Now, it doesn't seem like simple talk. It's like they all forget that both Domains are made of people, not just one."

Her teacher remained silent for a while.

Rain thought that he wasn't going to answer, but then the darkness asked suddenly:

"Where do you think this road is going?"

She was confused.

'Huh?'

"...East?"

He sighed.

"And what is east of here?"

Rain frowned.

Nothing. There was nothing east of here, only the Death Zones.

But, beyond them…

Her eyes widened a little.

"The Sword Domain?"

Her teacher spoke in a light tone, his voice barely audible in the small tent.

"That's right. You've been admiring the road construction, haven't you? Going on and on about roads, infrastructure, civilization, and so on. I agree, actually, it's kind of neat. The funny thing is, the technology Clan Song is using to build roads is based on how people in the waking world used to do it a long time ago, before the Dark Times."

Rain raised an eyebrow.

"Really? I didn't know."

Well, it made sense. A lot of modern technology did not work in the Dream Realm. So, the actual ways things were built here was a strange mixture of adapted modern engineering, Awakened powers, and dated methods from the ancient times.

It was a bit like reverse spelltech.

Her teacher sighed.

"Yeah. There was an empire once that excelled in building roads. But, Rain… the main reason they built such excellent roads was not for trade, transportation of goods, or development of civilization."

His voice grew a little wistful:

"They built them to speed up the deployment of troops. Because soldiers could march faster on paved roads than they would on dirt roads, or across wilderness. The main engine of progress, technology, and craft has always been war."

Rain lay in the darkness, suddenly feeling cold.

"Are… are you trying to say… that there will be a war? Between Song and Valor?"

Her teacher lingered with an answer.

However, in the end, she heard exactly what she was afraid to hear:

"The war between Song and Valor has already begun. Back in Antarctica, during the Chain of Nightmares. It's just that now… now, it is going to start in earnest. That is why Ki Song is in such a hurry to finish the Eastern Road."

He chuckled.

"...Why, it's quite fitting, if you think about it. We come from the realm of War, after all. So, now that we are leaving that realm behind, the first thing we do in a new world is wage a war. To see who is fit to sit on its throne."

Rain did not answer, stunned by what he had said. The revelation was too vast and too dire to comprehend. A storm of fragmented thoughts raged in her mind, but none came to its surface.

Then, the darkness spoke in a soft voice:

"What are you doing? Come on, start circulating your essence. The sooner you start, the sooner you'll be able to get some rest. And you really need to rest."

Rain flinched, then turned on her back and stared at the roof of the tent.

"...Is that why you've been hurrying me? So that I Awakened before the war starts?"

Her teacher answered quietly:

"Yes. You have to Awaken soon. Otherwise, it will be hard for me to protect you."

He remained silent for a few moments, and then added smugly:

"But if you don't, that's not a problem either. Your teacher is awesome enough to protect you anyway… hard is hard, not impossible."

Rain knew that he had a habit of inventing outrageous lies. So, taking his claims seriously was probably unwise…

And yet, for some reason, his boastful words calmed her, dousing the anxious flames that burned in her heart.

Letting out a sigh, she closed her eyes and concentrated on controlling essence.

Chapter-1783: Peaceful Days

The survey team moved east at a steady pace. Of course, they weren't going in a straight line — instead, they explored the Moonriver Plain, making frequent stops to let the specialists ascertain the terrain and compare the landscape with the rough map provided by the Song clan.

The specialists took some time to unload their equipment from the carts, leaving the heavy lifting to the porters. The Awakened stood guard and summoned several specially provided Memories to divine a few details that mundane equipment wasn't able to pick up.

The team left colorful flags in its wake, which would serve as a guideline for the road crew later.

At times, the entire group made camp to let Awakened Ray scout out those areas that could pose special danger, like the ruins of ancient cities. His Aspect was uniquely suited for this kind of task — although the young man was not especially lethal in direct combat, his abilities allowed the survey team to only consist of three Awakened instead of a dozen or more.

Awakened Fleur was similarly indispensable. Her Aspect was responsible for the startling speed with which the team was covering distance — not only could she help everyone recover their stamina, but the scrapes and wounds received in the rare skirmishes with the Nightmare Creatures were quickly healed.

If anything, it was Tamar of Sorrow that seemed to bring the least to the table. However, that was merely an illusion — because it was the young Legacy who took point when things did not go according to plan.

Ray's Aspect was mostly useful for avoiding trouble, while Fleur could resolve the dire consequences. However, it was the unexpected

and the inevitable that was not only the most common, but also the deadliest threat in the Dream Realm. Whenever the survey team faced unexpected danger, it was Tamar's sword that dealt with it.

…But, all in all, there weren't that many unfortunate accidents. Rain had expected that she would have to string her bow sooner or later, but it stayed safely attached to her pack — at least for now.

She continued to work on forming her soul core in peace.

In fact… strangely enough, her life as Rani was much more peaceful than her life as Rain. It was not only because she didn't have to hunt Nightmare Creatures anymore, but also because of the circumstances.

The wilderness was vast and tranquil, much different from the bustling liveliness of Ravenheart and the overcrowded sterility of NQSC. There was no everpresent noise, no familiar anxiety… no light pollution to dull the beautiful stars. The weather was harsh, but not nearly as oppressive as the murderous cold and searing heat of the ashen mountains.

Rain was enjoying herself. She quite liked walking across the desolate plain and feeling the cool wind play with her hair, watching the three moons travel across the velvet sky at night, and not having to worry about anything except for performing her work well and controlling the flow of essence.

The company wasn't bad, either. She was on friendly terms with most of the porters, who were all warm and nice people — the tough and prickly Elga, the somber and taciturn Pill, the former PTV magnate, "old goat" Carel…

The standoffish survey specialists lost most of their aloof attitude after a few days, and often joined them around the fire in the evening. Even the three Awakened became easier to talk to after everyone had grown a bit familiar with each other.

Despite the grim danger of exploring the wilderness, the mood of the survey team was strangely peaceful.

Sometimes, Rain felt like she was observing their small group from

the side. In those moments, she was suddenly struck by the eerie dissonance between the peacefulness of their days… and the dark shadow of the approaching war.

She wondered who else knew that humanity would soon be embroiled in a mad, fratricidal conflict. The porters were completely oblivious to the darkness of the future. The survey specialists did not seem to know, either…

Tamar of Sorrow must have had some idea, though. As a Legacy, she would be aware of the growing tension between the two Domains — especially so because her clan oversaw the source of the Tear River. Clan Song must have been shifting resources closer to the future frontline for a while now, and much of that cargo had to have been transported over water.

It was unclear if she had shared her worries with Ray and Fleur, but the three seemed to be quite close. So, they must have known something.

And Rain knew most of all, thanks to her teacher.

'What am I going to do?'

She could not quite conceive the scale of the calamity, as well as the toll that the war would take on humans… everywhere. Humanity was too big, but more than that, Rain was even struggling to imagine what would happen to her personally.

Logically, she was one of the few people in the Dream Realm who did not need to worry about the conflict between Song and Valor too much — she was from a government family, after all, and the government had always maintained its neutrality. Even if Ravenheart was besieged and occupied by the Knights of Valor, her family's situation would most likely remain the same.

But then again… if the two Sovereigns clashed and one of them won, would there even be a government after that? If the war escalated, would anyone be able to afford remaining neutral? Would the newly established cities in the Dream Realm stay safe from the constant threat of Nightmare Creatures while most Awakened were busy

fighting each other?

All these questions gnawed at her at night, when she was alone in her tent.

Well… Rain was never truly alone, and her teacher did not seem concerned with the war at all.

'Of course he wouldn't be!'

The sinister shadow must have lived through thousands of wars… maybe even caused a good chunk of them personally!

One night, Rain couldn't keep quiet anymore and asked in a whisper:

"Teacher… aren't you worried about the war at all?"

He remained silent for longer than usual.

Eventually, she heard him sigh.

"Worried? Ah… not really. Life is war, you know. When you live long enough, you get used to such things."

Rain frowned in the darkness.

"But you are so powerful. You destroyed the vessels of the Skinwalker easily. Don't you feel… even a little bit responsible? Aren't you going to do something?"

The darkness chuckled.

"Responsible? Well, I guess I do feel a little bit responsible. And who says that I'm not going to do something?"

Rain held her breath for a few moments.

"Teacher… what are you going to do?"

He let out a contemplative sigh, and then laughed quietly.

"Ah, I'm not sure. Maybe I'll kill both Sovereigns and put someone dependable in charge of humanity. Or go bird hunting… or make

waffles. Something like that."

She stared into the darkness for a while, then scoffed.

"Well, good luck! I must say, though… for someone who hides from everyone in a young girl's shadow, teacher, you sure talk a big game…"

The darkness responded with appalled silence.

After a while, he hissed:

"Go to sleep, you ingrate! And for your information, I'm not hiding in your shadow! I'm just… taking temporary residence here! For convenience…"

Rain smiled and closed her eyes, hoping to fall asleep quickly.

The next day, they reached the boundary of the survey area.

Chapter-1784: Stairway to Heaven

As they ventured further east, the Moonriver Plain started to change. There were fewer and fewer canyons in their way, and the air grew a little warmer. At night, the three beautiful moons seemed more distant.

The wind carried with it swirling black flakes. Rain did not need to touch them to know what they were… ash. It was as if they had returned to Ravenheart, but also different.

Back in the stronghold of Clan Song, the ash fell from the frigid sky because of the raging volcanoes. But here, it was somehow different, making Rain feel uncomfortable.

Eventually, the members of the survey team stopped. No one had given the command, but they simply froze in place, looking at the horizon in stunned silence.

'...Wow.'

Out there in front of them, far away… it seemed as if a snowy mountain chain was rising from the ashen haze. But as Rain studied the towering mountains closer, she couldn't help but feel a sense of incongruity. Because the shape was wrong.

Then, something clicked in her mind, and she opened her mouth in shock… or horror. Or awe.

The mountains weren't mountains at all. Instead, they were bones.

An inconceivably large skeleton lay on the ground in the distance, too large to be seen whole. What Rain had thought to be the slopes of a mountain chain were several titanic ribs, each rising into the sky

like ivory pillars that supported its weight.

The skull of the unfathomable corpse was mercifully out of view. The closest group of bone mountains, however, extended far into the Moonriver Plain. It was also shaped strangely, consisting of five lower peaks. Beyond them, a wide ridge rose gradually to a great height, like an eerie stairway to heaven.

The five mountains were the phalanxes of the colossal skeleton's fingers, and the rising ridge were the bones of its arm.

One of the porters whispered quietly:

"G—gods…"

Rain remained silent, but she felt like uttering something like that herself. There were simply no words to describe her emotions.

Awakened Ray glanced at them and smiled faintly.

"Gods? A god, maybe. That is Godgrave ahead of us."

The porters, who weren't very well-acquainted with the topography of the Dream Realm, looked at him in confusion.

He sighed.

"Godgrave is a Death Zone that serves as the north-eastern boundary of the Song Domain. It is a region of the Dream Realm where Great, Cursed, and maybe even Unholy abominations dwell. As for why it is called that… I think you can see for yourself. Nobody really knows what that terrible skeleton is, but it's easy to imagine that these are the remains of a god. Therefore… Godgrave."

The porters shivered.

"Awakened Ray, sir… are we going there?"

Ray smiled, but it was Tamar, the leader of the survey team, who answered:

"No. Of course not. A Death Zone is not a place for humans. Even if

we aren't devoured by some abominable horror, the land itself will kill us. Or the sky. More importantly than that…"

She glanced at the porters and the survey specialists.

"This is where the Song Domain ends. Queen Song's authority does not reach Godgrave, so you can't go there. As soon as you do, your souls won't be protected by the Queen's grace anymore, and you'll be summoned into the First Nightmare."

She sighed.

"In short, our mission is complete. We will camp here and turn back tomorrow… returning to the main camp should not take us nearly as long as it took to come here, since we'll be going in a straight line. The marching will be more intense, so prepare yourselves."

With that, she turned her back to the incredible sight of the colossal bones, as if not at all impressed by it.

Rain suppressed the desire to scoff.

'That's a Legacy for you…'

Would it kill Tamar to act like a normal girl? No one could remain calm when witnessing something that unimaginable. Why did she feel the need to put on airs?

Lady Tamar wasn't exactly unpleasant… but she was definitely more than a little stuck-up. Rain, who was used to rolling in the dirt, couldn't help but be entertained by how laboriously the younger girl tried to maintain an austere facade.

She often felt a compulsion to mock the Legacy heiress mercilessly… well, or at least tease her a bit. Of course, she never did — Rain wasn't stupid enough to mock a Legacy.

Only a complete idiot would do something like that. Even the best outcome would be receiving a challenge to a duel…

The survey team made camp. Since it was the last day of their official duties, they made a larger fire than usual and roasted all their

remaining monster meat. Even the three Awakened joined the rest of the team members, leaving the Echo to guard the camp.

Of course, the pilgrim did not join them, either. The dead man remained standing at the edge of the camp, emotionless and unfeeling, staring into the darkness with his glassy eyes.

It was a bit creepy to be in his presence, but the members of the survey team had long learned to ignore the dead man.

This time, it was Awakened Fleur who cooked for everyone. Her easy smile and friendly demeanor put everyone at ease, so the conversation flowed freely.

"Oh… Lady Tamar… if you don't mind me asking…"

Carel, the old goat, was uncharacteristically shy in front of the young Legacy. He mumbled something quietly, and asked in a cautious tone:

"I couldn't help but notice that you weren't very impressed by that huge skeleton. Have you seen Godgrave before?"

Tamar glanced at him coldly, lingered for a few moments, then shrugged.

"I did see it before. Actually, all three of us are familiar with Godgrave. That is where the Spell sent us on the winter solstice."

The eyes of the porters widened.

Even Rain was stunned.

'What the hell? It sent these kids to a Death Zone?'

How were they alive?

At the same time as she felt surprised, she was also feeling a little guilty. As it turned out, Tamar had not been acting haughty… she was just familiar with the titanic skeleton. More than that, whatever had happened to them there must have been quite traumatic. So, she was probably hiding her unease under the facade of indifference.

'...Talk about being prejudiced.'

Rain sighed, ashamed of herself.

The porters, meanwhile, were staring at the three Awakened in awe. Eventually, old Carel asked:

"On the winter solstice? I… ah… I would have thought that Lady Tamar would use the Dream Gate…"

It used to be that every Sleeper was sent to the Dream Realm on the winter solstice, where they had to find a Gateway, anchor themselves to it, and thus Awaken. These days, however, the situation had changed.

It was possible to pass through a Dream Gate before the solstice and anchor oneself in advance. That way, there was no risk of being sent to some unforgiving land, away from human Citadels.

Tamar's gaze darkened, prompting Fleur to laugh nervously.

"Oh, that… we completed our First Nightmare in late autumn, so there was not a lot of time before the solstice. There is a lot of paperwork involved in getting access to the Dream Gate, as you know. We just went to the Academy and tried to prepare ourselves instead."

She glanced at Tamar and smiled.

"Well, Ray and I did. Tamar's father is a Saint, so he could have brought her to the Lake of Tears personally, without the need of using the Dream Gate. Still, we met at the Academy."

The porters looked at the young Legacy with confusion. After a bit of awkward silence, one of them asked:

"That… lady's father must have been terribly busy…"

She furrowed her brow.

"He wasn't."

Then, Tamar blinked.

"...I mean, he was. He is. But that is not why."

Actually, Rain knew what she meant.

There might have been a safer way to Awaken for most Sleepers, but not for Legacies. That was because the Legacies had always had such an option — they just never used it. For them, the trial of the Nightmare Spell was like a sacred rite.

Legacies were fundamentally a warrior caste — the martial aristocracy of the new world. Their culture was uniquely harsh and unforgiving, forging them into people capable of facing the senseless terror of the Nightmare Spell. They took their valiance seriously.

Being sent into the Dream Realm on the winter solstice was a rite of passage. Some would say that it was an unnecessary risk… maybe even point to the Forgotten Shore as an example.

Thousands of young men and women had perished there before Changing Star finally conquered the Gateway.

But, at the same time, those who had survived were among the strongest champions of humanity now. Most were Masters, and some were Saints. Changing Star herself, Song of the Fallen, Nightingale, Raised by Wolves… those were legendary names.

So, even if Tamar's father had been afraid of sending his daughter to her death, he would have still done it. Because that was how Legacies were.

Rain sighed.

'That is so messed up.'

How had the leader of Clan Sorrow felt, willingly putting his daughter's life at risk?

How had Tamar felt, knowing that her parents would rather see her dead than weak?

Things like that would mess up one's head for life.

Suddenly, Rain didn't want to mock the young Legacy anymore.

She lingered for a few moments, the asked curiously:

"But how did you survive? As Lady Tamar said, a Death Zone is no place for humans. To make it out alive… it's like a miracle."

The three Awakened looked at each other somberly.

Eventually, Ray answered with a pale smile:

"We… received help."

Fleur shivered.

"Yeah. No human can live in a Death Zone… but actually, one human does. Well, at least he… he seems like a human? Nobody is really sure."

Tamar nodded with a dark expression.

"He was the one who saved us. The Lord of Shadows…"

Chapter-1785: Hermit Saint of Godgrave

"The Lord of Shadows?"

The porters shivered.

Night had fallen, and only the light of the bonfire illuminated the desolate plain. Flakes of ash danced in the air. Far away, the white phalanxes of the dead deity towered above the plain like mountains, and three pale moons were drowning in the darkness of the cold sky.

It was a perfect environment to tell a scary story.

Awakened Ray smiled faintly.

"Yes. The Lord of Shadows…"

Rain shifted a little to hear him better. She was haunted by an insufferable shadow, so of course, anything that had to do with shadows was of interest to her.

The young man took a deep breath, cradled a cup of fragrant tea in his hands, and continued:

"Out there in Godgrave, the sky is usually covered by clouds. When the veil of clouds is torn, blinding light pours from an incandescent white abyss, incinerating anything that moves. But… there is a place where light can never reach. A land that is forever shrouded in darkness. Out there in the darkness stands an ancient temple built of black stone. That is where the Lord of Shadows lives."

Rain stared at Awakened Ray incredulously.

'...Is he an idiot?'

The young man had good control of his voice, drawing the listeners into the scene he was describing. But… no, what was he doing? Were they in a theater? Why couldn't he just speak normally?

Awakened Fleur turned away, blushing from embarrassment. Tamar of Sorrow closed her eyes with a stoic expression.

The porters, though, seemed delighted and leaned forward a little, enjoying the story. Rain blinked a couple of times, then did the same, not wishing to stand out.

Awakened Ray continued:

"The Lord of Shadows… is believed to be a reclusive Saint, but nobody knows for sure where he comes from. Nobody even knows if he is a human, really. He always wears a suit of black armor, and wears a fearsome black mask. His voice is cold and insidious, and his powers are great beyond belief. He lives alone in the dark temple, surrounded only by the devils who serve him."

The young man took a deep breath and then said quietly, allowing his voice to tremble a little.

"It's true. I've been to the temple, and saw those devils myself. One is a living statue of a beautiful female knight. One is a towering hellspawn forged from black metal. One is an enormous serpent whose body envelops the entire temple, its scales like polished onyx. However, none of them are as frightening as the Lord of Shadows himself.

His mask is carved from black wood in the image of an ancient fiend, and looking into its eyes… is like looking into the abyss itself."

He shivered and shook his head.

"I thought that I'd die right there and then, looking at him. However, the Lord of Shadow just stared at me for a while, unmoving, and then said in a voice that lacked all human emotion… 'I've decided not to kill you, Dreamer Ray.' As if he needed a reason to allow someone to live, instead of a reason to take someone's life."

Rain secretly threw a glance at her own shadow.

How come that Lord of Shadows lived in a palatial temple and had a bunch of powerful minions serving him, while her teacher did not even have a place to stay?

Was her teacher a bum among shadows?

'Unfair…'

One of the porters asked in a trembling voice:

"But, Awakened Ray, sir… how did you end up in that evil temple?"

Ray opened his mouth to answer, but it was Fleur who spoke first… perhaps afraid that he'll say something nonsensical.

"The Spell sent us three to Godgrave. We found a place to hide and sent Ray to scout a path of escape, maybe find someone to rescue us… he stumbled into the territory of the Lord of Shadows by accident, and was brought to the Citadel by one of the Lord's Echoes."

Tamar nodded.

"Actually, the Lord of Shadows rescued several Sleepers last year, as well. That is where most of what is known about him comes from — from what those Sleepers said after being sent to the Song Domain. Well, we were actually lucky. I don't know if he would have gone out of his way to find me and Fleur, but there was someone else at the temple when Ray arrived."

Ray stared at his two companions with resentment, indignant that they had spoiled his theatrical retelling of their first venture into the Dream Realm. Then, he sighed and nodded.

"Yes. If I was alone… the Lord of Shadows might have sent me back on my own, or even disposed of me to avoid inconvenience. He's a bit… sinister, to say the least. Luckily, at the time, Changing Star and a cohort of Fire Keepers were taking shelter in the temple. They were on a mission in Godgrave, but took time to risk themselves and rescue Fleur and Tamar.

Lady Nephis even persuaded the Lord of Shadows to help. If anyone can convince an eccentric powerhouse like him, it's her."

Tamar sighed.

"The three of us could only hide. Even now that we have Awakened, we would not survive a day in Godgrave. But Changing Star and the Lord of Shadows, they willingly went into the depths of the abomination-infested bones to save us. Because of it, they were surrounded by Great Nightmare Creatures."

She glanced at Fleur, hesitated for a moment, and added in a wistful tone:

"The Lord of Shadows took us and used some kind of movement ability to cross more than a hundred kilometers in a few seconds. Then, he threw us to the Fire Keepers and went back. We could only feel the ground shaking from time to time… but, eventually, both of them returned. Battered, but alive."

Everyone seemed shocked.

"They fought m—many Great abominations? And won?"

Tamar spared a joyless smile and nodded.

"In fact, many Saints can prevail in a battle against a Great Nightmare Creature of a lower Class. Several of them, though… it's like a death sentence. Only Changing Star and a few others are capable. The Lord of Shadows… even though I don't know who he is, his powers are at least equal to those of the most valiant Transcendents. He is without a doubt one of the most lethal warriors of this era."

She looked into the fire.

"Don't listen to Ray and his nonsense, though. The Lord of Shadows is just a Saint. People say that he is eccentric, and I can understand why — who would want to live in a Death Zone? Maybe he just hates people, or maybe it has something to do with his Flaw. In any case, the three of us owe him a debt of gratitude. We would have been dead if not for his strength."

Rain was deep in thought about the mysterious Saint… but the porters seemed to have forgotten about his existence already.

Instead, they leaned forward with glistening eyes.

"So… uh… Lady Tamar…"

Old Carel smiled excitedly.

"Did you say that you met Changing Star and the Fire Keepers?!"

The other porters were similarly excited.

"Wow! What is she like in real life? Is she as beautiful as in the recordings?"

"Was Lady Cassia there, as well?"

"Did you fly on the Chain Breaker?"

Rain rolled her eyes.

Then, unexpectedly, she opened her mouth and said in a tone of nonchalance:

"You guys, leave Lady Tamar alone. Also, if you want to know about Changing Star, just ask me. You might not know, but she taught me swordsmanship once. Oh… Nightingale gave me a few archery lessons, by the way. And I used to scold Saint Athena because she leaves dirty plates around the house… tsk, that slovenly woman..."

'...What the hell am I doing?'

Why was she spouting nonsense? That was not like her at all!

But… unexpectedly, it was also a bit fun.

'Oh, no... teacher has corrupted me...'

The porters stared at her, then exploded with laughter.

"Right… so, Rani, what is Lady Changing Star like?"

"Are you sure that she taught you swordsmanship? Didn't you teach her, instead?"

"No one has seen that Shadow Lord without a mask. Maybe it was Rani all along!"

Rain spared them a bright smile.

"...Well, have you ever seen me and the Lord of Shadows in the same room?"

There was another bout of laughter.

Some time later, the roasted meat was finished, and the members of the survey team went back to their tents. The three Awakened decided which one of them would guard the camp first and followed suit.

Rain spent several hours revolving her essence. Deep at night, she finally sprawled on her sleeping bag in total exhaustion.

She lingered for a while, then asked quietly:

"Hey, Teacher. Do you know about that Lord of Shadows?"

He remained silent for a while.

"Sure. I know him quite well. Why are you asking?"

Rain smiled in the darkness.

"No, no reason. It's just that… you are a shadow, and he's the Lord of Shadows. So, uh… is he like your superior?"

Her teacher's voice revealed a hint of indignation.

"Who, that clown? My superior? Ha! If I wanted to, I could erase him from existence with a thought."

She chuckled.

"But he has a huge temple and a bunch of powerful servants. He also seems close with Lady Nephis… didn't you say once that you're practically her boyfriend? Sorry, I don't mean to sound rude… but it seems more like he is her boyfriend, instead…"

Her teacher was appalled.

"I did say that. And, by the way… I am! I asked her on a date, and she agreed. She was delighted to agree, even! Who can resist my charm?"

Rain grinned.

"I'm just saying. That Lord of Shadows, he seems to know what's what. Won't the other shadows mock you for being an underachiever because of him? No temple, no servants, no beautiful Saintess hanging on your arm… ah, I pity my poor teacher… teacher is such an ascetic…"

Instead of an answer, a threatening growl resounded from the darkness.

Chapter-1786: Decent Archer

Her teacher seemed to be sulking, and did not speak with her the next morning. Rain crawled out of her tent, disassembled it, and prepared for a long day of marching across the desolate plain.

She was in a good mood because of having managed to tease her teacher successfully last night.

There was no need to do the survey work anymore, so the team moved west at a brisk pace. They were also familiar with the terrain, and could follow an optimal route instead of wandering aimlessly.

Of course, Tamar of Sorrow had been exaggerating a bit when she said that they would go in a straight line. The Moonriver Plain was within the borders of the Song Domain, but the only Citadel here was far to the south, at its very edge. And since there was nothing but the Hollow Mountains to the north, this land was wild and dangerous.

There were plenty of Nightmare Creatures here, and so, the survey team had to avoid the hunting grounds of the more dangerous abominations.

Still, they were making good progress.

The further west they went, the more canyons barred their path. By now, the members of the survey team were very familiar with crossing them, so much so that it had almost become a habit.

They would try to find the place where a stone bridge once stood, since the canyons were usually narrow there. The remains of the bridges also further narrowed the chasm.

Then, young Tamar would mount her wolf Echo and leap over the canyon while holding a rope. After fastening it on the other side, she would raise a simple pulley system.

The carts and equipment would be transported over the chasm first, and the people would follow. The whole process was a bit tiring, but not especially dangerous — even if the canyon started to wail and was suddenly flooded by rushing water, the ropes remained above the powerful current.

The porters just had to be careful not to look down.

The canyons were incredibly deep, their depths shrouded in inky darkness. Falling down meant death. The currents, however, were incredibly violent — so, falling into the water was not much safer.

The survey team reached another canyon and went through the familiar motions. This one was not very wide, but it was still going to take some effort to transport all the equipment to the other side. Rain, who was usually one of the last people to traverse the chasm, leaned on the cart she had been pulling and took a deep breath.

Since the crossing was monotonous, and they had already gone through the process countless times, it was easy to grow numb and allow one's mind to wander. However, even while presenting a relaxed facade, Rain still maintained vigilance. She knew all too well that a moment of carelessness could mean death in the Dream Realm.

Which was why she was one of the first people to see it.

Tamar and her Echo were already on the other side, and the ropes were drawn across the chasm. The carts had been attached to the hooks and pulled over the canyon. Now, it was time for humans to follow.

There were three ropes — one for them to walk over, two to hold with their hands. Awakened Fleur was in the middle of crossing, and one of the survey specialists was waiting for his turn to follow.

However…

Rain was suddenly distracted by something. It was the dead man standing a small distance away from the resting porters.

His gaze was just as empty and expressionless as ever. However, he had just turned his head, silently facing the canyon.

She frowned.

The pilgrim had always been passive and quiet. He never did anything except for following the survey team.

Why had he moved now?

'Crap…'

Before anyone could react, there was movement in the canyon.

An enormous, clawed hand rose from somewhere below and swiped at the survey specialist. It's desiccated palm was the size of his entire body, and the vicious claws seemed sharp enough to rip the man to shreds.

Rain's eyes widened.

Luckily, the surveyor staggered back and tripped, seemingly on nothing, just in the nick of time. The claws missed him by a hair's breadth, failing to rip his body apart.

…They did snap the three ropes, though.

"Fleur!"

Ray's shout tore apart the silence, but he was far away to do anything.

'What are you shouting about… she's an Awakened…'

Fleur might not have been strong enough to survive a fall into the canyon, but she definitely could hold on to the ropes.

It was the porters who were in real danger, because the enormous hand was already reaching toward them with its claws.

What saved them wasn't a miracle, but the cold steel of Tamar's sword.

The Legacy girl had been on the other side of the canyon, watching the others cross. She reacted at the first sign of danger. The Echo was

standing guard further away, so she simply jumped into the chasm without wasting any time.

Tamar of Sorrow, like all Awakened, possessed two Awakened Abilities.

One allowed her to step on the air. She could do it once as a Sleeper, and twice now that she had Awakened. The second Ability allowed her to burst with startling speed for a short amount of time — she was so fast, in fact, that it seemed as if she was simply teleporting from place to place.

Which was how Tamar crossed the canyon without the help of her Echo.

By the time she landed on the other side, her sword had already woven itself from sparks of light. It was a brutish zweihander with a leather-bound ricasso. Tamar was a young woman of medium height, so the great sword looked comically large in her hands… she did, however, wield it with effortless ease.

She activated her Awakened Ability again and shot forward, delivering a terrifying slash to the wrist of the hidden abomination's arm. Despite the fact that it was as thick as the trunk of an ancient tree, the zweihander cut through the tough hide, steel muscles, and adamantine bone, severing the creature's enormous hand.

Tamar seemed to disappear from one spot and appear in another in the blink of an eye. At the same time, the hideous hand separated from the creature's arm in a flood of viscous blood.

It fell heavily on the ground… and continued moving, crawling toward the terrified porters.

"Ray!"

Finally, Awakened Ray reacted. He dashed to intercept the hand, while Tamar turned to the canyon.

By then, the Nightmare Creature was already climbing over the edge.

It was huge and hideous, with a gaunt body and long, sinewy limbs.

Its head was disproportionately large for the emaciated torso, with two little bloodshot eyes and an enormous, crimson maw.

Worst of all, it seemed to possess too many arms.

Tamar had severed one at the wrist, but three hands were already reaching toward her. Two more were gripping the edge of the canyon, pushing the giant up.

There was barely any time to react.

The young Legacy did something that most warriors would never do in a battle — she jumped high into the air, dragging the great length of the brutish zweihander behind her.

A jump was usually tantamount to death because one could not control their direction or react to the opponent's attacks without standing on the ground. A strike delivered in the air was also weaker than a strike delivered while using a solid surface for support.

However, that did not apply to Tamar.

She pushed off the air once, soaring to greater height, and then once more, changing her trajectory completely. At the same time, she spun like a wheel and brought the zweihander down on the enemy's arm.

This time, the force contained in the strike was not augmented by the startling speed of her Awakened Ability, but it was still fearsome. The arm of the abomination was not severed, but the great sword bit deep, not only slicing the veins and muscles, but also cracking the bone.

She had evaded the other two hands by jumping over them, as well.

Tamar would have been clear if not for the fact that at that moment, the creature's two sinister eyes locked on her, and another three hands shot at her from the canyon.

The young Legacy faltered for a split second.

…Then, a sharp arrow whistled past her and pierced one of the abomination's eyes. A moment later, another arrow sank into the

remaining eye of the hideous Nightmare Creature, effectively blinding it.

A pained roar shook the plain.

Landing on the ground, Tamar activated her Awakened Ability and dodged to the right, avoiding the grab of the blinded abomination. She would have been in trouble if it could see, but now, things were different.

Shaking the fetid blood off the blade of her great sword, she prepared to attack and glanced back briefly.

Ray was busy pushing back the severed hand… so who had made those stunningly accurate shots?

The beautiful porter girl, Rani, was standing near the pile of unloaded equipment, holding a simple recurve bow. Her black hair was dancing in the wind, and there was a strangely serene expression on her pale face.

Her black eyes were glistening with something that resembled… excitement?

She was already drawing the bow again, the fletching of a handmade arrow brushing against her white cheek.

A little stunned, Tamar turned back to the enormous abomination.

'...She did say that she was decent with a bow.'

If that was decent... then Tamar did not even know what great was.

As she pushed her body forward, a stray thought surfaced in her mind.

Rani had also said that she had some experience trekking in the wilderness and could handle a sword fine.

Suddenly, Tamar wanted to know what her definition of "fine" was.

Chapter-1787: Ack

The situation… was not good.

Ray had managed to stall the monstrous hand, hacking it to pieces with his weapons — he wielded a short sword in one hand, and an axe in the other. Rain had blinded the abomination with her arrows, and Tamar disabled two of its arms.

The problem was that the creature had just too many of them. Rain had already counted nine, and more were rising from behind the climbing monstrosity like a ghastly forest.

Worse still, it was an Awakened abomination. She had aimed at the obvious vulnerability first — the eyes — but other than that, there wasn't a lot of damage she could do. Even if her arrows pierced the tough hide of the creature, it would not harm it too much.

Tamar faced the forest of monstrous arms with grim resolve, wielding her hefty zweihander with daunting skill. She used both of her Abilities to dance between the barrage of killing blows. The young Legacy seemed like a steel whirlwind, alternating unpredictable jumps with short bursts of stunning speed. Torrents of fetid blood were released into the frigid air from her great blade.

She managed to stall and damage many limbs of the abomination, in large part due to the creature having been blinded, but could not advance to attack its body.

'Crap…'

Rain dropped her bow and unsheathed her sword.

"Why are you just standing there?! Get back!"

The petrified porters were stirred by her shout and staggered away

from the carnage. Miraculously, none of them was dead yet.

The abominable claws rained down in pursuit of the elusive Legacy girl, sending pieces of stone flying. A net of cracks spread on the ground from each missed blow, viscous blood spilling into the narrow fissures.

Rain dashed forward and supported Awakened Ray, who had managed to sever two of the hideous hand's fingers, but almost got pierced by the long claw of the third.

They were in a stalemate, and that stalemate wasn't in their favor. The creature was continuing to climb up from the canyon, and once it crawled onto the plain, whatever resistance Tamar was able to offer would be overwhelmed.

So, someone had to reach the abomination and deal it a mortal wound. Rain would have gone herself, but she was mundane — her tachi would not be able to slay the giant.

Ray, on the other hand, was Awakened, and wielded enchanted weapons. Better yet, he could become imperceptible. So, with come luck, his blade would reach the creature's neck without being blocked by the countless claws.

"Go! I'll finish this thing off!"

The young man glanced at her with wide eyes, hesitated for a split second, then nodded and disengaged. He must have thought the same.

A moment later, Ray was gone.

…Literally.

He Activated his Awakened Ability and dissolved into the air. There was no sound, no smell, no… anything. It was as if he had never existed at all.

Rain brandished her tachi, deflected a terrifying claw, and then kicked the severed hand with all her might.

The hand was the size of an adult human, and weighed quite a lot. Still, Rain's kick sent it rolling backward.

With two fingers missing, it had turned rather clumsy. The bizarre thing was still trying to turn itself over when she dashed forward, turned her sword, and thrust it down, using all of her own weight to make the strike more powerful.

The tachi pierced the monstrous palm, slid between the bones, and nailed the severed hand to the ground.

It was a mundane blade, so an Awakened abomination could easily snap it. However, even an abomination would have to follow common reason to achieve that — it would need proper grip and support, at least, ideally good leverage. Laying on the ground, impaled through the center, the monstrous hand had none of those.

So, it just struggled fiercely, unable to free itself for now.

Rain staggered back, then looked up to evaluate the situation.

Tamar had managed to sever several more arms, but was hopelessly stuck in the avalanche of monstrous limbs. Blinded, the creature flailed them with no sense or reason, making a mess of the plain.

Ray would be having trouble closing in, as well — he might have been invisible, but the space between the survey team and the massive body of the climbing abomination was full of stone shards and deadly claws. Ray was still a corporeal being, so making way through the carnage was not going to be easy.

On the opposite side of the canyon, Fleur had climbed the ropes and was now standing on the edge, shouting something as she summoned her Memories.

Rain couldn't quite hear what the pretty healer was shouting, but she managed to read her lips.

"...Tyrant! It's a Tyrant!"

'Damn.'

Rain had never faced an Awakened Tyrant before. Nor had she ever wished to.

As she faltered for a moment, shaken by the revelation, a blurred silhouette shot over the chasm.

Then, the Echo of the giant wolf landed on the Tyrant's back, tearing at its shoulders with sharp claws and sinking vicious fangs into its neck.

That damned thing finally made it across the canyon.

Tamar's Echo seemed like a Fallen Beast or Monster, at best… it wasn't quite powerful enough to destroy an Awakened Tyrant outright.

However…

It was very large. And it weighed a lot.

The abomination was still trying to climb out of the chasm, hanging awkwardly with half of its massive torso towering above the edge. When the monstrous wolf landed on its back, the wolf's weight was added to the Tyrant's own, pulling it into the deep abyss.

It swayed back precariously.

A frenzied shriek escaped from the creature's maw, and it flailed its arms in the air. It was still holding onto the edge with two hands, but now, more of them scratched the stone with their claws, leaving deep grooves in it.

The Tyrant's fall was arrested.

With so many hands trying to keep the abomination from falling, Tamar received a bit of breathing room.

Without wasting even a split second, she dashed forward.

"Ray! The hands!"

Her zweihander drew a beautiful arc in the air, then fell down like

the blade of an enormous guillotine. It severed the fingers of one of the two main hands the Tyrant was using for support.

At the same time, the fingers on the other hand were suddenly torn apart, and a vague silhouette of a young man revealed itself in the air. He was hacking at the fingers with his weapons, aiming to damage the joints between the phalanxes.

Rain used her leg to throw her bow into the air, caught it, and nocked an arrow on the string in one fluid motion. A moment later, the arrow pierced into the deep wound dealt by Ray, disabling one of the fingers.

With both of the main support hands damaged, the rest could not hold the weight of the Tyrant anymore. When the Echo jerked its head and pulled the abomination back with all its weight, the ghastly creature finally slid off the edge and disappeared into the depths of the canyon with a deafening howl.

Rain trembled and lowered her hands.

'D—damn… that was intense.'

She exhaled slowly, then glanced at the porters.

Everyone was in one piece. The survey specialists were all fine, as well.

Which was… more than a little unexpected.

'Did my teacher protect them secretly?'

Rain suspected that he did. Especially because the dead pilgrim was suspiciously missing.

Had the dead man been swept into the canyon in all the mayhem, or had her teacher pushed him into the chasm while no one was looking?

She would have to ask him later…

But it was too early to relax, still.

Picking up her quiver, Rain lamented the loss of several arrows, then circled around the pinned hand of the Tyrant and approached the edge of the chasm.

She stopped near Ray and Tamar. All three of them looked down.

The depths of the canyon were shrouded in darkness, and it was impossible to say how far down its bottom was.

Ray swept his hair back nervously and looked at them.

"Do you think it's dead?"

Tamar lingered for a moment, then pursed her lips and hesitantly shook her head.

"I haven't heard anything from the Spell."

Turning back, she glanced at the severed hand that Rain pinned to the ground with her sword.

"Go finish that thing off, Ray. It should be the Tyrant's minion… what a bizarre creature, by the dead gods."

Who had countless hands instead of proper minions?

Ray sighed, then readied his weapons and headed away from the edge.

A storm of sparks rose around the Legacy girl, and then, the wolf Echo manifested itself behind her. There was no need to let it be damaged by the fall — she had simply dismissed it, then summoned it back.

Finally, Tamar turned to Rain and studied her for a moment.

Then, she scowled.

"You…"

However, before she could finish the sentence, a chilling wail resounded from the depths of the canyon, reverberating across the

plain. It was like the world itself was weeping.

The flood was coming.

It was impossible to hear her voice now, this close to the chasm.

…It was also impossible to discern what Fleur was shouting.

Rain stared across the canyon in confusion. The Awakened healer was jumping and waving her hands in the air, pointing at them with a desperate expression on her lovely face.

"...ack! …ope… ing… all! …ack!"

Rain could barely hear anything because of the wailing

'Ack? What is trying to… pack? Attack? Crack?'

Back?

Suddenly, he eyes widened.

Rain looked at Tamar in panic, but it was already too late.

The edge of the canyon… had been damaged severely by the barrage of blows dealt to it by the Tyrant. The weathered stone was broken and cracked.

And just then, it finally crumbled.

Before Rain could do anything, the entire side of the canyon suddenly moved, and then collapsed, falling into the wailing darkness.

And the two of them were pulled down with it, plummeting into the bottomless chasm alongside countless tons of broken stone.

Chapter-1788: Weeping Canyon

Life was like that.

You could train your body tirelessly to turn it into a tenacious, resilient tool. You could practice swordsmanship and archery until your hands bled, temper your observation skills and analytical thinking, and test yourself against countless opponents in real combat to turn shallow knowledge into deeply rooted experience.

And then, you can still die because of nothing but bad luck.

Rain felt resentful as she plummeted into a bottomless abyss, surrounded by an avalanche of shattered stone.

But no, that was not true… her current predicament was not due to misfortune. She was at fault. It was her who had not been cautious enough, perceptive enough, and smart enough. All the signs had been there — the cracks in the stone, the weathered state of the canyon walls, the devastating power of the Tyrant's blows. She should have put two and two together.

She should have done better.

So, Rain had no one to blame but herself.

Still… still!

She was indignant.

To die like that, it was really unfair!

All these thoughts flashed through her mind in the span of a moment. Then, she gritted her teeth and tried to think of a way to survive.

First things first… the fall itself would not kill her just yet. The bottom of the canyon was far away, and she could survive bouncing

off its walls once or twice. The most pressing threat were the falling boulders — they were massive and heavy enough to turn Rain into a pancake, or at least smash her skull open.

Raising her arms, she tried to shield her head. A moment later, something slammed into her forearms, and she felt sharp pain. Luckily, the boulder was not large enough to crush her, so her bones weren't even broken.

The next one, though…

Catching a glimpse of it, Rain shuddered.

It was like a wall of rough rock was pursuing her, mere moments away from colliding with her fragile body. There was no chance to evade.

A moment before she was crushed by the massive slab of stone, however, something strange happened. The darkness seemed to touch it lightly, and the enormous boulder shattered into a million pieces.

Instead of being killed, Rain was simply showered by small pieces of debris.

'Teacher…'

Her teacher rarely helped her directly. However, it seemed that he was unwilling to let his student perish so senselessly, and interfered — just like he had interfered to keep the porters and surveyors from being ravaged by the Tyrant.

'I take back all the bad words I've called him!'

There was no time to feel touched, but Rain still felt a strange warmth in her heart.

Then, she turned her head to find the only source of salvation there was, apart from her eccentric shadow companion…

Tamar of Sorrow.

The Legacy girl could take two steps on the air, so if anyone could

help Rain survive, it was her.

If she would even bother wasting her time to save a mundane porter, of course. It would be much easier, not to mention safer, to only worry about herself and let Rain fall to her death.

'Where is she?'

Everything was happening so fast, but time also seemed to slow down. Plummeting into the wailing darkness, Rain looked around feverishly and tried to catch a glimpse of Young Lady Tamar.

But she could not see her…

However, that was not because Tamar was nowhere to be seen. Rather, it was because Rain was looking too far.

She did not expect that the Legacy was nearly upon her, and only realized it when something blocked her vision.

'What…'

Then, Rain gasped as something hard rammed into her abdomen.

"Argh!"

As it turned out, Tamar had been quicker to react. After regaining her bearings, she swiftly evaluated the situation, located Rain, and then used the first of her two steps to arrest her fall and launch herself to intercept the falling porter instead.

The hard thing that had collided with Rain's abdomen, knocking the wind out of her, was the Legacy girl's shoulder. Since Tamar was clad in a suit of plate armor, her steel pauldron was not at all soft.

Grabbing Rain around the waist, she continued to fly toward the wall of the canyon. However, another huge boulder barred their path — hissing a stifled curse, Tamar used the second step to change their direction and avoided it.

Now, her Dormant Ability was exhausted — she would not be able to use it again before touching a solid surface with her feet.

They flew into the darkness, falling deeper and deeper… but, at the same time, getting closer to the wall. Tamar shielded Rain from falling debris and yelled:

"...old …n!"

A moment later, Rain's body was violently jerked and came to a halt.

'Ah… crap, that hurt…'

She opened her eyes and tried to assess the situation.

The wailing rising from the depths of the canyon was absolutely deafening, making her ears ring. She was surrounded by darkness — the sky was like a narrow line of light far, far above.

Tamar was hanging from the damp wall of the canyon. One of her hands was thrust into a narrow crack, while the other was still holding Rain.

'I'll be damned.'

They were actually alive.

Well… for now.

Since Tamar had technically landed on something, she could activate her Dormant Ability again. Then, like a squirrel, she could slowly make her way back to the surface while carrying Rain.

There was a big problem, though…

The canyon was weeping.

Which meant that it was going to turn into a raging river at any moment.

Rain couldn't really see well in the darkness, but she thought that she noticed a panicked look in the Legacy girl's eyes.

Then, they were enveloped in the roar of rushing water.

A moment later, the flood slammed into them like a concrete wall.

Rain did not even have time to scream.

Tamar's hand was violently wrenched out of the crack, and they were carried away, deeper into the canyon.

The last thing Rain remembered was the sight of a solid surface of stone, approaching her at terrible speed.

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She was cold.

And tired.

Everything hurt, so Rain did not want to wake up.

'I'll just sleep a five more minutes…'

She couldn't be late for class... but she could, a little bit. If she pretended to be pitiful, maybe mom would let her sleep a bit more.

Only... wasn't her mom far away?

And there were no classes anymore. Instead, she was... she was...

Opening her eyes, Rain stared at the gray sky.

Drops of rain were falling from above, cooling her face.

She studied the sky for a bit, then flinched and sat up.

She was laying on the solid ground, surrounded by the vast expanse of the Moonriver Plain.

There was a small fire crackling near, with her teacher warming his pale hands over it.

The battered figure of Tamar of Sorrow was laying on the other side of the fire. She seemed to be in a rough shape, and still unconscious.

Rain blinked slowly.

'We're alive.'

That was good news.

The bad news was that she had no idea how they had escaped the canyon, and where they were. She vaguely remembered being surrounded by soft darkness and carried by the raging current, but then… at some point, she must have passed out.

It was hard to differentiate one part of the plain from the other, but Rain did not think that she recognized the surroundings. The members of the survey team were nowhere in sight, as well.

Letting out a deep sigh, she turned to her teacher and asked hoarsely:

"What happened?"

He looked at her and smiled.

"Well… you two fell into the river, and I fished you out."

Rain nodded slowly.

"How far were we carried by the current?"

He shrugged.

"Pretty far."

'...It's okay.'

Since both of them were alive, the situation could still be salvaged. They could find the survey team… maybe… and return to the main camp of the road crew. Or proceed to one of the advanced camps on their own.

Or…

Rain looked at her teacher and forced out a smile.

"Teacher… you are so kind and powerful! Can't you… you know… take us back?"

He responded with a smile of his own.

"Oh… sure, I can!"

However, his voice was a little sinister.

"Look at that poor girl, Tamar… she's barely alive. It would be really kind of me to take you both back, wouldn't it? One might even say that only a heartless monster wouldn't. So I really should... ah, but I won't."

Rain's smile grew a little forced.

"What? Really? Come on... it won't even be that hard for you..."

Her teacher nodded.

"Really! If you want to get out of here alive… well, what can I say? All you need to do is Awaken. Do that, and you'll be fine."

With that, he gave her a pleasant smile and disappeared into her shadow.

A moment later, his voice resounded from the darkness:

"Alternatively… that Lord of Shadows, he seems to know what's what. You can ask him for help!"

Rain stared at her shadow incredulously, then took a deep breath.

'I take back everything I took back! That... that petty bastard!'

Chapter-1789: Peculiar Connection

After welcoming the Fire Keepers for a few short days, the Nameless Temple had grown silent once again.

However, the silence was not going to last long.

Soon enough, the dark realm that Sunny had built in the heart of Godgrave would become a hive of activity. Due to the deal he had made with Morgan, his Citadel was to be made into a secondary staging ground for the Sword Army during the war. A relatively small, but elite contingent would be stationed here, using the temple as their operation base.

But the peace and quiet would be gone long before that.

After all, the soldiers had to live somewhere. They needed beds, places to cook and consume food, storage space to keep a large amount of supplies, an infirmary… and so on. All of these things had to be built before the war started.

There were so many things that went into waging a war. A military conflict between Awakened was different in many ways, but still fundamentally similar to any other war in human history — it demanded an unfathomable amount of logistical preparations.

Sunny felt dejected.

It had taken him a lot of effort to restore the Nameless Temple to its present state. Now, however, it would be turned into an actual Citadel — a place that existed to serve as a safe haven for the people in the Dream Realm. There would be a small army of workers coming here to perform all the laborious tasks soon.

Which was not a bad thing.

However, he had grown used to the peaceful silence.

Today, there were only two humans under the roof of the ancient temple. One of them was Sunny himself. The other was Cassie, who had arrived as the Seneschal of the Great Clan Valor to assess the state of the Citadel and collect all the necessary information to launch the construction.

At least that was the official reason.

Sunny had thought that Nephis would come personally. He was a little relieved that she was not here — his mind was burning in anticipation of their upcoming date, so seeing her before that would have been somewhat embarrassing.

It was nice to see Cassie outside the context of their deal, as well.

"...The temple itself must be off-limits to the soldiers, unless it is to use the Gateway. Of course, they can retreat inside if we are under attack, and the outer perimeter is breached. Even then, I will not allow them to venture into the inner sanctum and the underground level."

Cassie turned her head slightly.

"There is an underground level?"

Sunny smiled.

"Don't pretend you don't know. Nephis saw it, which means that you saw it, too."

The young woman coughed in embarrassment.

"Right… sorry. It's a habit of mine to act appropriately oblivious. Otherwise, people get uncomfortable around me."

He spared her a long look.

Since it was only the two of them in the temple, Sunny had dismissed

Weaver's Mask. It felt strange, to walk around with a bare face as the Lord of Shadows… even if Cassie could not see his expression, only her own.

He shook his head.

"I doubt there is anyone in the world who knows the extent of your abilities and the depth of your foresight better than me, Cassie. So, you don't need to worry about making me feel uncomfortable."

'There is also no one who knows me better than you, now. There is really no other person either of us can trust more.'

She smiled faintly.

"I'll keep that in mind."

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then led her outside.

"The territory around the temple is mostly cleared of Nightmare Creatures. There will be no problem building barracks and all the necessary facilities around it. My Shadows will help protect the perimeter. You should know how powerful they are… the base will be very safe, all things considered."

She shook her head.

"We can't rely on your… Shadows… to maintain security, Sunny. After all, you are expected to participate in the battles against Song. Who knows if their presence would be required somewhere else?"

Sunny contemplated for a moment, then nodded.

"You are right."

It felt very strange, to be discussing the inevitable war… realm war… so casually. And yet, here they were.

Studying her delicate face, he asked:

"Who do you think stands the better chance of winning?"

Cassie tilted her head a little.

"It's hard to say. The Sword Domain has a stronger military. It also has better strategists. Most importantly, there are the Ivory Tower and the Nameless Temple. It is all but inevitable that the King of Swords will arrive to Godgrave before the Queen of Worms. With him here, the forces of Valor will venture into the Hollows sooner, and conquer local Citadels faster.

It's hard to imagine how such an advantage won't snowball into a crushing avalanche."

She hesitated for a moment.

"However, the Song Domain is… unpredictable. There seems to be no reason for them to be eager to fight this war — if anything, they should be scrambling to avoid it due to how disadvantaged they are — and yet, they are as eager as the rulers of the Sword Domain. Which means that they are hiding something. Well… of course they are."

Her expression darkened a little.

"That encounter between you and the Skinwalker near Ravenheart. The emissaries of the House of Night were clearly in contact with Prince Mordret. Perhaps they have brokered some kind of deal behind the scenes. There are other possibilities, as well. But at the end of the day, none of it matters."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"It doesn't?"

Cassie remained silent for a moment, then said calmly:

"No. Because neither Song nor Valor will win the war. We will win the war."

He laughed.

"You say it with such conviction. However, isn't the whole thing predicated on Nephis achieving Supremacy without the help of the

Spell? And there is no saying if she will, least of all if she'll do it on time. It's all a gamble."

Cassie faced him and smiled faintly.

"...Sure. But so was every other step along the way. Yet, here we are. Still standing."

She hesitated a little, then added in a quieter voice:

"Plus, it's not entirely a gamble."

Sunny sighed, then led her back into the temple.

"It's not?"

The young woman lingered with the answer. Eventually, she said in a subdued tone:

"The six of us — those who came back from the Tomb of Ariel — all have strange gaps in our memory. But my memory has been affected the most. Sorry… I haven't revealed that secret to anyone before you, Sunny, and it's not easy to admit. My memory is really… severely damaged, and I can't see the future anymore."

She took a deep breath.

"But there was a time when my memory was intact, and I could learn a lot about the future from my visions. That version of me must have known that there would be a war, and that Nephis would have to defeat the Sovereigns without challenging the Fourth Nightmare."

Sunny considered her words carefully.

"You mean…"

Cassie nodded.

"Yes. If that version of me did not attempt to create contingencies, it means that she saw a way to win the war. Therefore… perhaps it is not as big of a gamble as you think."

Sunny hesitated for a while.

He knew that Cassie had been in a fragile mental state for the past four years. Not only because of losing her ability to see glimpses of the future, but also because much of her past was shrouded by fog… after all, he had been the purpose and cornerstone of all her schemes, and her schemes were truly life-consuming.

When he turned Fateless, a huge chunk had been ripped out of her memory, replaced by oblivion.

So, he didn't really want to dispel her hopes. But it wasn't good to let her rely on them, either.

He sighed.

"Or you have never known about the future after the Tomb of Ariel at all. Because the future has always been meant to become unclear after that."

Suddenly, there was a strange intensity on Cassie's delicate face. She faced him and kept quiet for a few long moments, struggling to contain her emotions.

Sunny had an idea of what she was thinking about.

"Even if I ask you, I won't remember the answers, will I?"

He shook his head slowly.

"You won't."

Of course, it would be great if Sunny could fill the gaps in her memory and let Cassie feel like herself again. But he couldn't.

Between the two of them, there was a peculiar and bitter connection. Sunny had been forgotten by the world… but Cassie had forgotten herself. He struggled to judge which one of them was more pitiful.

Still, he wanted to console her, even if only a little.

Sunny looked away with a sigh.

"...Of course, that doesn't mean that you never will."

Cassie seemed frozen by his words. She raised a hand, then lowered it again.

"There is a way? For your existence to be restored?"

Sunny hesitated with a dark expression on his face.

Of course, he had been contemplating that issue for a long time.

In the end, he had determined that there was.

Chapter-1790: Value of Regret

There was a single question at the root of the problem… why had the Thieving Bird stolen his fate? Sure, the loathsome thing seemed to be obsessed with everything that concerned Weaver. But Sunny did not think that it was the only reason.

After pondering the question for a while, he had developed a certain suspicion. He had lost the connection to the Nightmare Spell after becoming fateless, which meant that carrying the Nightmare Spell had something to do with one's fate. Perhaps fate was the medium through which the infection spread.

In any case, the creature which now possessed his fate… would therefore possess his connection to the Nightmare Spell, as well.

So why would the Thieving Bird want something like that?

To answer that question, one had to realize that the creature that Sunny had met in the Nightmare was not the real Thieving Bird. The real Thieving Bird was long dead. Instead, the odious thing he had run into at the Estuary was a replica of the vile Terror created by the Spell.

And a replica could only exist in the illusory realm of the Nightmare.

A carrier of the Spell, however… a carrier of the Spell would be expelled back into the real world once the Nightmare was over. They would have a way to go back.

So, Sunny had come to believe that the real reason why the Thieving Bird wanted his fate was to become a carrier of the Nightmare Spell, and slip through the cracks of the illusory realm, finding a backdoor to reality.

If so, that would be the greatest prison break in history... quite a

suitable feat for the greatest and most vile thief to have ever lived.

Very few creatures could find a way back into existence after having been destroyed for thousands of years, and in such an original way.

Therefore… the creature that had stolen his fate, and was now in possession of it, was not gone. It had not been erased forever by the collapse of the Nightmare. It was somewhere out there, in the real world, liberated from its illusory prison and free to roam the world, stealing anything that had caught its fancy.

Which meant that it could be hunted down and killed. And that he could get his fate back from it, somehow.

Sunny was nowhere near powerful enough to risk facing a Cursed Terror, let alone a Cursed Terror that neither gods nor daemons had been able to deal with… even the Void Beings were said to have loathed the Vile Thieving Bird, which meant that they had suffered from its mischief as well.

The damned bird was a real menace...

More importantly, though, he didn't know if he even wanted to get his fate back. Despite everything, he wasn't sure.

Because there were strings attached to regaining his fate… both literally and figuratively. Some days, Sunny woke up and wanted nothing more than to be remembered. Some days, he woke up and felt that he would never give up his freedom, which he had paid for so dearly.

But Cassie deserved to know that there was a possibility, at least.

He sighed.

"There is a way. However…"

Sunny's voice turned heavy.

"There is a price to pay if one wishes to become fateless. There is also a price to pay if one wishes to become fated. And I… am not sure if I want to pay that price."

They reached the courtyard, where a lonesome tree stood, its leaves rustling in the darkness.

The tree was feeling much better after being tended to by Shakti. It was doing much better, in fact, than it had in the outskirts, even though there was no sun to shine on its leaves and bathe it in warmth.

The two of them looked at it in silence — Sunny with his own eyes, and Cassie as well.

After a while, she asked:

"Why did you plant this tree in your Citadel?"

She was thinking about another tree, perhaps, one that he had burned on the Forgotten Shore.

It would be easy to imagine why the sinister Lord of Shadows would keep a tree like the Soul Devourer in his temple. However, this one was perfectly mundane, and did not even bear fruit.

Sunny hesitated for a while, then looked at the base of the tree's trunk. There, three lines were carved into the bark.

"...It's a memorial tree."

Cassie turned to him silently.

He smiled.

"A long time ago, I carved two lines into it, as a grave for my parents. Later, I added a third… as a grave for myself. This is my Citadel, and this is my grave. I think it's quite fitting."

Sunny lingered for a moment and added:

"I've never told you about it, so maybe you'll remember."

However, she did not. Cassie seemed distracted for a moment, and then said calmly:

"Should we proceed to the actual discussion, then?"

So she had known that about him, as well.

He smiled, and summoned the shadows, manifesting them into two chairs and a table. Soon, another avatar of his arrived, carrying a tray with tea and refreshments.

This one was the naughty shadow, and Sunny was not controlling him directly. That was why there was a subtle, but unmistakably lecherous smile on the bastard's face. He stared at the avatar with murder in his eyes, and the naughty guy hurriedly changed his expression.

He was even extra gallant when pouring Cassie tea.

Her face crumbled a little, and then she let out a melodious laugh.

"Sorry… I just can't get used to that ability of yours."

Sunny smiled.

"That's alright. Sometimes, I feel like I'm not used to it, either. Well, and sometimes, I feel like I am actually too used to it. It's a strange thing."

He sighed and dismissed the avatar.

"But then again, the very idea of normalcy seems more and more distant the further on the Path of Ascension we walk. As Saints, we are already far removed from what a normal human would be… some more than others. You must be experiencing it yourself, with the volume of alien memories you experience and the number of people you perceive the world through."

Cassie's Ascended Ability was not limited to vision. She shared all senses of her marks, so, in a way, she had experienced being young and old, strong and weak, sick and healthy, male and female. That kind of experience was not something a human would ever be privy to… and it must have changed her perception of herself, as well.

Sunny himself was living several lives at the same time. He knew that

it had changed him. His three personas were quite different from each other despite being controlled by one mind… it was as much of an adaptation to differing circumstances as a defensive mechanism. Otherwise, the lines would become blurred, and he might one day become lost.

That was another reason why he was clinging to his secrets so desperately, feeling a strange reluctance to let go of the act.

Sunny leaned back.

"Sometimes I wonder what we will become, if we succeed. A Supreme being must be even further from being human. What about a Sacred being? What about a Divine one?"

He remained silent for a while, staring at his tea with a bleak expression. Then, he said somberly:

"There was a time when I harbored great hate against the Sovereigns. Because they were distant, because they were corrupt, because they treated human lives as currency and did nothing when people died."

With a deep sigh, Sunny straightened his back and looked at the rustling leaves of the lonesome tree for a while.

"And yet… haven't I spent these last few years doing nothing while people died? Such hypocrisy. Of course, I had my reason. Ultimately, it doesn't matter what a single Saint does — a pawn can struggle and strive, but the players are the ones who decide the outcome of the game. So, right now, I am biding my time to replace the morally corrupt players. It's for the greater good."

A sad smile twisted his lips.

"But then, I am sure that this is what the Sovereigns think, as well. That what they are doing, no matter how callous, is for the greater good."

Cassie remained silent for a long time, then shook her head decisively.

"There is a big difference between us and the Sovereigns."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"There is?"

She nodded.

"Yes. It is that we are ashamed of our faults, while they are not. It might sound stupid, but that matters. It matters more than you can think."

He laughed.

"That's it? The only difference is that when we do something distasteful, we feel regret?"

Cassie shrugged.

"There is no need to think in absolutes. It is a fallacy. We also don't send assassins to kill little girls, or try to unleash Nightmare Creatures in populous cities. The extent of one's willingness to do despicable things for what they perceive as greater good is also important, not just the principle. More importantly... we are also competent, while they are not.

The end only justifies the means if you actually reach the end."

She hesitated for a moment, and then smiled.

"Or, if you prefer… one can't make an omelette without breaking eggs, but if they break the eggs and can't even make an omelette, then they shouldn't be allowed into the kitchen. Don't you think?"

Sunny chuckled.

"That… sounds pretty reasonable. Thanks for levelling with me."

He picked up the cup and took a sip of the fragrant tea, then leaned forward and smiled.

"Now, then. Shall we discuss the details of how we are going to make this omelette?"

Chapter-1791: Queenmaker

Sunny and Cassie were seated across from each other, enjoying tea and refreshments. The courtyard was peaceful, and the leaves rustled quietly above them. Other than that, there were no other sounds.

The scene would have been picturesque if not for the fact the world was shrouded in absolute darkness. Neither of them had any need for light, and that, too, was a reason why having Cassie here felt comfortable to Sunny.

Dirty deeds were meant to be done under the cover of darkness. And although them having tea in a friendly atmosphere seemed innocent enough, in truth, it was a meeting between two people who conspired to usurp the world in a mayhem of violence. There was hardly a dirtier and more treasonous intent than a bloody rebellion.

Today, they were going to reveal their cards to each other. Without knowing what each of them was scheming, it would be impossible to form a meaningful cooperation.

Cassie was going to relay all the information to Nephis, of course.

She sighed.

"Fundamentally, there are two tasks that need to be accomplished. One is to eliminate the Sovereigns. The other is to usurp their thrones. Needless to say, both are hard to achieve."

She sipped her tea and took a bite from a soft pastry.

"You should know by now some of the work that has gone into ensuring the former. Ultimately, Nephis is responsible for warfare and conquest. My role in ensuring the downfall of the Sovereigns is limited — for now, I have been mainly focused on elevating her renown in the hearts of the people.

It's pure propaganda — I have my avenues of manipulating the public opinion, and Jet has the government sources, as well. It… has been a long road, to get where we are now."

She smiled faintly.

"Of course, we were fortunate in many regards. The decision made by the government to turn Nephis into a symbol, back when she had failed to return from the Forgotten Shore, was a stroke of luck. The reason why they made that decision — the great and tragic legacy of Immortal Flame and Broken Sword — is a grim blessing, as well.

Conquering the Second Nightmare as a Sleeper and being adopted by a Great Clan added momentum to her rise to glory and breathed new life into her stirring tale. And lastly, the harsh treatment she received from the elders of Valor only played into our hand, fuelling the flames of her legend."

Cassie shook her head lightly.

"Plus, it is not that hard to embellish Neph's achievements. No, not even so… there is no need to embellish anything. Her past feats are astonishing, and she has fought against the Nightmare Spell tirelessly for the past four years. She is always on the forefront, spilling her own blood for someone else's sake. Better yet, she has never lost a battle after becoming a Saint.

The number of lives she has saved is incalculable. So… it's embarrassing to admit, but my job as her spymaster is rather easy. I just have to fan the flames and help the stories of her deeds spread faster and wider."

She took another sip of tea and remained silent for a moment.

"It is to strengthen the foundation of her Domain, of course. But not only for that. If… when Nephis faces the Sovereigns in battle and vanquishes them, it is paramount that her Domain consumes theirs. There is no point otherwise. The Sword Domain, the Song Domain — when the war is over, there should only be the Immortal Flame Domain, and it must encompass all of humanity. Becoming the Human Domain.

Not only because hundreds of millions of people in the Dream Realm would be thrust into the First Nightmare otherwise, but also to prepare for what comes next."

Cassie unhurriedly finished her pastry.

"There are a lot of things that must be done to achieve that. Nephis is already immensely venerated by the people, but when the time comes, she has to be acknowledged by the Saints who hold dominion over the Citadels. They must pledge their loyalty to her after Ki Song and Anvil of Valor are gone.

It would be simpler to eliminate all the loyalists and raise new ones to replace them, but those loyalists are also the foundation of humanity's strength. So, we have to proceed with a surgical decapitation strike instead of a thorough culling. Then, we must get every Legacy Clan to bow before the new queen."

Her expression darkened a little.

"There are already more than a few Saints who share a bond with Nephis. Like Sky Tide of the White Feather clan, who had been mistreated by Valor, and whose life we saved during the Battle of the Black Skull. There are others, as well, who have been helped by her in recent years. The government will follow Jet, and we even have a few connections in the Song Domain.

However… there is still a lot of work to be done, on that front. If there is a saving grace to all that, it's that the weight of an individual in the era of the Nightmare Spell is infinitely greater than it had ever been before. Because one person can indeed be more powerful than an army.

If Nephis is the only Supreme left standing, then many people would feel compelled to submit, simply because resisting her would be a tall task."

She closed her eyes for a moment, a tired expression on her face.

"Still, there has to be a neat story to create a veil of legitimacy. And that… that is much harder to manifest out of thin air. As things are

going, the assassination attempt on Nephis would be used as the reason for the war — so, in a way, the war will start from her.

If we want everyone to accept her ending it, then we must position her as the voice of those who are opposed to the war from the very start. That way, when she betrays her adoptive clan and eliminates both Sovereigns, we can present it as a courageous person making a reluctant choice to stop two warmongering tyrants, not a murderous opportunist who wants to become a tyrant herself.

A peacemaker, not a usurper."

Her tea was growing cold.

"That is it, in broad strokes. Now, for the details… where do I even start?"

After that, Cassie went into a detailed explanation of all the schemes she was weaving behind the scenes, every resource at Neph's disposal, every connection, every clandestine preparation, every strategy and tactic they had developed for the eventual battle against the Sovereigns.

She spoke for quite some time, to say the least. The scope of it all was nothing short of daunting… so much so that Sunny doubted which one of them had seven bodies, for a moment.

The work had started a long time ago — pretty much immediately after the Forgotten Shore. However, it had only truly ramped up in the last four years. It seemed like neither Cassie nor Nephis had rested even for a minute after becoming Saints.

And yet, it still didn't seem enough.

How could it be, if their goal was so ambitious? Not only did they want to bring down the current rulers of the world, but also to put the crown on Neph's head.

After a while, Cassie grew quiet. By then, one of the avatars had replaced the tea kettle several times, as well as delivered more refreshments.

Sunny sighed, then shook his head slightly.

"I understand that the actual battle with the Sovereigns is not your responsibility, Cassie. Nephis is in charge of that. However… I still think that you are treating the act of killing them too lightly. Your preparations are insufficient. Your approach is too reliant on simply willing victory into existence. Sure, that is exactly what Nephis is known for… but, still.

There is a huge hole in the plan."

He lingered for a few moments, then smiled darkly.

"...Luckily, I am here to fill it."

Chapter-1792: Bait and Switch

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, then stood up.

"Please, follow me. I want to show you something."

Cassie rose, and they walked together through the impenetrable darkness. As they did, he spoke in a tone of indifference:

"You know a lot about what I've been up to after becoming a Saint. For a while… I did not even have plans of ever returning. So, my preparations are not as extensive as yours. Still, I've been working on bringing down the Sovereigns earnestly, in my own way."

She nodded.

"Your involvement is both welcome and appreciated. You might want to be modest, Sunny… but there is really no need to. There are very few Saints more powerful than you. Maybe even none. So, your presence alone is significant enough to change the balance of power entirely."

Sunny smiled.

"Who says that I want to be modest? Yes, I am powerful. Not only am I powerful, but each of my Shadows is also a walking calamity. There are only six people in the world that I am inclined to be wary of — the three Sovereigns, Mordret, Nephis… and you."

His smile widened.

"And look at that, I've joined hands with two of them to defeat the rest. I'd be afraid of us if I was someone else."

They returned to the inner sanctum of the temple and entered the stairwell to the underground level.

Sunny's smile dimmed a little.

"Returning to my preparations to kill the Supremes. Make no mistake… I am determined to achieve Supremacy without venturing into a Nightmare, as well. It's just that while Nephis is prevented from doing so by circumstances, I simply can't. Because… well, you know. Sadly, I must admit that I am half a step behind her, in that regard.

Which is why my plan revolved around battling at least one of the Sovereigns as Saints."

They reached the great underground hall, which was drowning in darkness. Sunny had hidden it from Nephis the last time around. However, Cassie was witnessing the world through his eyes — so, she could see everything that he could see.

She was momentarily frozen in place.

"Don't worry. It's safe."

The hidden level was like a reflection of the main hall, as if someone had flipped the entire temple and put it below ground upside-down. The great pillars of black marble descended from the tall ceiling and rested on the floor, and silence reigned in the vast expanse of solemn emptiness.

There were only two differences — the absence of the altar and the mystical circle that took the entirety of the far wall.

The circle itself looked… quite striking. It was as if the great wall of black marble had turned into liquid once, and swirled around an invisible axis before solidifying in a sudden ripple. It was both orderly and chaotic, enthralling and unnerving... but mostly beautiful.

It was also capable of absorbing a vast amount of essence like a bottomless vortex. Because of that, it emanated a sense of magnetic pressure.

Cassie was stunned by the sight.

"What… what kind of sorcery is this?"

Sunny looked at the great circle, too.

"A kind that is much older than all the rest. Divine sorcery."

If it could even be called that. Sorcery was something that followed a framework of laws and principles to shape the world, usually by manipulating soul essence. Divine sorcery, however, was simply a manifestation of a deity's will.

There were some tricks to it, no doubt — otherwise, there would be no need for the mystical circle to exist, or for the string of fate belonging to the Chain Lords to be contained in the seven knives.

However, Sunny could not even begin to guess these tricks. For all intents and purposes, divine sorcery created miracles, not magic.

There was a hint of awe in Cassie's voice:

"What does it do?"

Sunny remained silent for a moment, then answered evenly:

"You probably don't know, but the Nameless Temple has not always stood in Godgrave. In fact, I found it somewhere else. It is a wandering Citadel, and the circle allows it to wander."

Cassie's brow furrowed a little.

He knew that learning that fact pushed her into rethinking a thousand of preconceived notions.

A few moments later, she turned to him and slowly said:

"You put it in Godgrave… as bait."

He smiled, allowing her to continue.

"You knew that a Citadel standing in the middle of the future battlefield would possess an irresistible attraction for both Song and Valor. So, you put your temple here and let your presence be known

by delivering those Sleepers to the Song Domain. Then, you just sat back and waited… until Nephis arrived. Instead of infiltrating the Sword Army, you let them invite you to join.

Shower you with gifts and try to appease you, even. Just to have you fight on their side, which was your goal all along."

Sunny chuckled.

"You are half-right."

Cassie raised an eyebrow.

"Only half?"

He nodded.

"It is true that the Nameless Temple is bait. But it is also a trap."

Sunny inhaled deeply and looked up, as if trying to pierce the marble walls with his gaze.

"The clash with the Sovereigns is inevitable, and one way or the other, it must happen here. Either they will come to besiege my Citadel, or I will move it to besiege them. Even if Nephis manages to become a Sovereign, she will still be new and inexperienced as a ruler of a Domain. So, she'll need all the help she can get when she faces the enemy."

He lingered for a moment.

"The darkness that surrounds the Nameless Temple is not one of its Components. In fact… well, you might not remember if I tell you where I received it from. Suffice it to say, it is a shard of an ancient Domain. A Divine Domain. The Realm of Shadows."

Sunny sighed.

"I can't control it, and am too weak to claim ownership of it. However, it is still a piece of a foreign Domain of unfathomable power. When either of the Sovereigns enters it, their authority will be weakened, if not suppressed entirely."

Cassie considered his words carefully. Slowly, a hesitant smile appeared on her lips.

Then, she seemed to think of something else.

"But your plans would not be limited to just weakening their authority… you are far too thorough to be satisfied with just that."

Suddenly, her eyes widened.

"The Great abominations that sleep below the temple!"

His smile turned a little sinister.

"Yes. They are a present I've been preparing for the Sovereigns. A swarm of Great Nightmare Creatures to welcome them as my guests, freshly freed from a maze of nightmares and burning with furious desire to avenge their imprisonment. Of course, just that is not worthy of a proper welcome gift. I should be a generous host, after all."

Cassie tilted her head a little. A moment later, she faced him with a flash of understanding in her beautiful blue eyes.

"In the memories… you had a fifth Shadow. A black stallion who wields power over dreams. However, I've never seen him here, or with any of your other incarnations. Sunny… where is that Shadow?"

Sunny grinned.

His gaze fell down, at the floor of the Nameless Temple.

After a while, he said:

"Nightmare is busy with an important task. He is lulling a special guest into slumber. The centerpiece of my welcoming committee."

He faced Cassie with a cold expression.

"A very nasty creature of the Cursed Rank. Since we're inviting the Sovereigns, we should have a guest of honor, don't you think?"

Chapter-1793: Soft Hand

Nephis had judged that the only way to defeat the Sovereigns was to become Supreme.

However, Sunny had held a different opinion. He had been fully prepared to face them as a Saint — just as he had faced countless adversaries of a higher Rank than him in the past. People like him were forged by bringing down creatures more powerful than them, so in principle, there wasn't much difference.

All he had to do was study the enemy, ensnare them in a net of deceit and treachery, and then put his life on the line. Wait for them to break themselves against each other, and then deliver a fatal strike to finish off the battered foes.

That was why he had made the Nameless Temple into a trap, and sent Nightmare to assemble a swarm of slumbering horrors.

The Dream Curse… was a frightening power. It spread unseen, infecting those unfortunate enough to contract it one after another. Its influence was subtle and insidious, and by the time the curse was ready to pull its victim into the maze of nightmares, it was already too late to resist it.

Of course, the Great Nightmare Creatures slumbering under the temple still tried. They struck against the walls of the dream prison, just like Sunny had done in the Kingdom of Hope — the nightmares subjugated by his Shadow were continuously destroyed, breaking apart under the onslaught.

However, at the same time, Nightmare conquered more of them… the new dreams he collected belonged to abominations of vast and terrifying power, and so, the walls of the dream maze grew stronger and stronger. As did the dark destrier himself.

Still, it was a daunting task for Nightmare to lull a Cursed being to sleep.

Sunny's steed had been at it for many months already. The Nightmare Creatures populating the area of the Hollows around the Cursed One's lair had succumbed to slumber one after the other. Then, the fallen deity itself was slowly infected, one drop of insidious poison at a time.

The Cursed One had resisted for a long time, but eventually, the Dream Curse seeped into its mind, body, and soul. At first, it would grow sluggish sometimes, then it would doze off for a minute or two before recovering. Finally, it fell asleep.

Its slumber was still restless and shallow, but Sunny was certain that he would be able to pull it into the underground hall of the Nameless Temple before the Sovereigns came.

Of course… his preparations were flawed, as well.

He had started on this plan not long after returning to civilization, still disoriented by the changes that had happened in his absence and badly informed.

Sunny sighed.

It was not that Nephis was incapable of constructing a plan to clash with the Sovereigns as a Saint. She was experienced in slaying overwhelming foes, as well. It was just that it was not an option for her — because after the Chain of Nightmares, the two Domains were holding the equivalent of an entire Quadrant's population hostage.

If the Sovereigns were eliminated without a new Supreme taking their place, the Dream Realm would drown in human blood. And Nephis had made it clear in the Crimson Spire that she did not only care about reaching her goal, but also about reaching it the way she wanted.

So… as Sunny saw it, both of their plans had to succeed if they wanted to achieve an acceptable outcome.

'What are the chances that nothing will go wrong?'

There were many unpredictable factors. Mordret was a wild card… so were the Sovereigns themselves. There was also the third Supreme, Asterion, who was mysteriously missing.

But they had no choice but to try.

He looked at Cassie.

"That is the gist of it. I think that we stand a chance, if things go right for us. If things go wrong — which they will, I'm sure — then, well. I guess we'll have to improvise."

She remained silent for a while, still stunned by the brazen audacity of his simple, but simply unbelievable plan.

Who would place a Citadel in the middle of a Death Zone, fill it with sleeping Great Nightmare Creatures, kidnap a Cursed One, and then bait the Sovereigns into causing the swarm of horrors to wake up?

A thing like that was nothing short of unthinkable, and yet, the Lord of Shadows had not only thought it, but also made it true.

She shook her head slowly.

"Improvisation… yes…"

Then, Cassie took a deep breath and composed herself.

"The key to good improvisation is being prepared."

Sunny smiled.

"I expected you to have a contingency."

Cassie was someone who had mastered the art of guiding events in a desired direction with a soft hand. A rigid plan was destined to fail, but if one was flexible enough, no unpredictable event could become an insurmountable obstacle. The success of the astonishing web of schemes she had woven to give him a chance to be free was proof that her approach worked.

So, she would have had something in mind for the inevitable clash

with the Sovereigns.

The young woman sighed.

"It is nothing revolutionary. You should know well as an experienced hunter… one should study the enemy before confronting them. The Sovereigns are shrouded in mystery. But if we want to strike them down, we need to know them… their upbringing, the environment in which they were formed into people they are, their youth. How the Broken Sword's cohort was formed, how it rose to glory. How it fell apart.

All of that, and more."

A somber expression appeared on her face.

"Needless to say, most of that information is either erased or twisted to such a degree that learning anything truthful from it is impossible. I've been… trying to uncover as much as I can. But it hasn't been easy, and most of all, I've been very cautious, afraid to attract attention. The King of Swords still doesn't trust Nephis that much, after all. Being discovered would mean certain death."

She remained silent for a few moments, then added:

"But that is about to change. Once the war starts, everything would be thrown into chaos. That is when we'll be able to act more boldly. With my ability to read memories and perceive many things, and your versatile arsenal of stealth and infiltration abilities… if the two of us put our minds together, I'm sure that we can uncover a great number of secrets under the cover of the mayhem."

Cassie took a deep breath.

"Including the most important one."

Sunny gave her a long look.

"What do you think is the most important secret?"

Cassie hesitated for a while, then faced him and said quietly:

"...You are right. Our battle plan is too vague. But there is something that can make the odds much more favorable — a piece of information that is as important as it is tightly sealed. At the end of it all… I suspect that the success of our entire endeavor will be decided by whether we manage to solve that mystery or not."

Her beautiful eyes grew cold.

"The single most important thing we must learn... are the Flaws of the Sovereigns. If we grasp their Flaws, victory will be ours. If not, all that awaits us are the flames of hell."

Sunny looked at her silently for a while.

Eventually, he said:

"You want to steal the secret of their Flaws?"

Cassie lingered for a bit, then smiled.

"Yes. And I want you to help me steal it, Sunny."

Chapter-1794: Last Memory

There was a lot more to talk about, so they returned to the courtyard and immersed themselves in a detailed discussion of the upcoming war. Now that both knew what hidden cards they held, they could work out how to deal with a great number of possible events effectively. At the same time, more issues were uncovered as they discussed tactical solutions.

For example, Cassie possessed a much deeper knowledge of what Aspects, Abilities, and Memories the main combatants of both Domains possessed. She could share all that knowledge with Sunny, which would help him deal with these people on the battlefield, should the need arise.

He had collected a lot of information in the last year, but she knew more. So, he felt a subtle sense of excitement as many of the gaps in his understanding of the playing field, the players, and the figures they would move were covered one by one.

Still, it was a strange conversation. Neither of them had the ability to predict how the war would turn out, exactly. So, they were simply preparing themselves to face the unknown as best they could. The rulers of the Great Clans were having similar meetings, without a doubt. Granted, theirs were much more crowded and ostentatious.

Sunny also knew that, although he was facing Cassie, Nephis was passively participating in the conversation as well. The blind seer had the ability to communicate with her telepathically, after all. So, she was both talking to him and relaying the necessary information to Nephis at the same time, asking for her input when it was needed.

After a while, it seemed like they had finally exhausted the deep well of things that needed to be discussed urgently. Finally, silence enveloped the Nameless Temple once more.

Cassie poured herself more tea and picked up the cup, turning to the lonesome tree.

After a while, she spoke evenly:

"The situation is developing rapidly in the waking world. Clan Valor has already leveled accusations against Master Dar and Silent Stalker. They are not pointing directly at Clan Song, yet, but when the Queen inevitably refuses to support the investigation, it would be all too easy to make it seem as if she is implicated."

She let out a deep sigh.

"Both Domains are boiling with indignation. The citizens of the Sword Domain are in outrage over the attempt on Neph's life, while those in the Song Domain are appalled at being accused of it. Passions are burning hot, and all the seeds of discord that had been planted earlier are blooming. The situation is highly volatile. If this continues…"

The young woman hesitated for a few moments.

"I'm afraid that peace won't outlive winter. Come spring, one of the Sovereigns will declare war."

Spring was roughly a month away. Sunny knew these facts himself, but he still couldn't quite believe that the calamity was so near.

Had the ancient people felt the same way in the days before the Doom War?

A month was not a lot of time at all.

He closed his eyes for a moment.

'I won't be able to forge the sword for Nephis in time.'

Nor would he be able to solve the mirror maze below the true Bastion in time. Not to mention that he had not even gotten close to infiltrating the Jade Palace yet.

It seemed that he would only be able to gain more fragments of

Weaver's lineage after the rulers of the two Great Citadels were gone. Unless he wanted to leave his main body and one of the six shadows on the sidelines, leaving himself in a weakened state for the carnage in Godgrave.

What was he going to do with the humble shopkeeper once the war started?

Nephis would leave Bastion. Cassie, too…

Was he really going to stay?

Sunny sighed, then looked at his blind companion.

"I don't think that our private deal can continue."

Cassie had agreed to hide his presence in the true Bastion in exchange for reading his memories. Sunny could only sneak there when the moon was full. And if the war was going to start in a month...

She remained silent for a moment.

"There is still a full moon left before the war."

Sunny shook his head dejectedly.

"I don't think that I'll be able to conquer that maze in a single night. Still… there is one more memory I want to show you."

A pale smile appeared on his lips.

"So, how about we do it right now?"

Cassie was a little startled.

"Now? Here?"

He nodded.

"We are alone, and no one will disturb us. I'll have more time to explore the maze if I pay for your services in advance."

She seemed a little hesitant.

"Are you sure?"

Instead of answering, Sunny finished his tea, then stood up and moved his chair closer.

"Quite sure. Look into my eyes."

Cassie remained motionless for a few moments, then did what he had told her to do.

Sunny thought back to the Forgotten Shore.

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He was laying on the weathered stone, staring dispassionately at the empty black sky. His face was motionless, and his eyes were empty.

He had scaled the statue of the Knight a day or two ago, and simply remained there without moving ever since. This was where he had first arrived at the Forgotten Shore, all those years ago.

There was no feeling or desire in his heart.

'...How did I end up on this damned statue all alone again?'

Life was such a funny thing. He had worked so hard, and suffered so much, but here he was, right where he had started.

What was he supposed to do now?

He remembered the black mirror of the sealed sea once more, feeling regretful for not diving into its dark depths. That would have been a fitting way to end it all.

But he had already decided against it, so there was no going back.

Instead, he would just stay here for a while more.

Another day passed in deafening silence.

And then, another.

And then… Sunny grew bored.

It seemed that boredom was a much more powerful emotion than all the rest. Because he was still tormented by it, even when nothing else was able to bother him much.

Eventually, Sunny let out a frustrated sigh.

"This is seriously tedious."

Muttering a curse, he sat up and looked around.

'Alright.'

There was nothing more he wanted to see on the Forgotten Shore. So, it was time to decide where he was going to go next.

The Hollow Mountains lay south. The Nightmare Desert lay east.

No one knew what lay west and north.

So, these were his two choices.

Follow the mountains west, or venture in the opposite direction of where humans lived?

'Let's get as much distance between me and humanity as possible.'

Sunny smiled faintly, then stood up.

In the past, it was an arduous process for him, to descend from the colossal statue. But now, he simply stepped and fell down, turning into a crow at the last moment. Opening his wings, he glided on the cold wind and flew above the ashen desert.

It was time to delve into the unknown.

Chapter-1795: Burned Forest

Before leaving the statue of the Knight behind, Sunny hesitated for a while, and then manifested one of his avatars. Taking control of that incarnation, he left a tether on the ancient stone.

Sunny had the ability to possess seven bodies now, but he still only had a single soul. Each of his incarnations was nevertheless capable of having its own tether. He wasn't sure that he would want to return to the Forgotten Shore, but since crossing the Hollow Mountains again did not sound particularly pleasant, decided to leave himself a path, just in case.

With that done, Sunny went north. Riding Nightmare, he traversed the silent darkness at a measured pace. The hooves of his tenebrous steed rustled softly in the ashen dust, and with each day, the distance between him and the distant human territories continued to increase.

He had never visited the northern reaches of the Forgotten Shore before, so everything here was new to him. Granted, there was not much to look at — at times, curious landmarks appeared on the horizon, but none of them managed to pique his interest.

There were crumbled ruins, bones of ancient leviathans, and frames of rotten ships. He left it all behind, feeling calm and unburdened. There was nothing he had to accomplish and no looming necessity urging him forward. Time lost all meaning to him.

He slept when he was tired and ate when he was hungry. Other than that, Sunny did not concern himself with anything.

Of course, he still forced himself to maintain vigilance. There could still be Nightmare Creatures left on the Forgotten Shore, and even if there were none, it was a bad idea to break the habit of always paying attention to his surroundings.

Eventually, the landscape around him changed.

Sunny first noticed that there was less and less dust covering the ground. Then, patches of dark soil started to appear with increased frequency. That meant that the coral labyrinth had been sparser here once.

A few days later, he started to encounter tall hills. There were more of them the further north he went, standing in a strangely orderly manner. After investigating one of the hills, Sunny discovered that it was artificial in nature. He could sense a vast burial chamber somewhere far below him.

It was a barrow.

Climbing to the top of the burial hill, Sunny looked around and counted. However, there were too many of them to count — giving up after a few hundred, he sat down and stared into the darkness for a while.

Then, he stepped into the shadows and descended into the burial chamber.

A broken sarcophagus stood there, at least ten meters in length. Inside were the bones of a nameless giant. There were remains of crude armor covering the bones, but time had erased all clues of who was buried here, and by whom.

There was no vengeful wraith waiting for Sunny in the burial chamber. Nevertheless, he suddenly felt cold sweat rolling down his spine. Trusting the sense of dire premonition, he threw one last look at the sarcophagus and dissolved into the shadows.

Returning to the surface, Sunny looked at the boundless black sky and climbed into the saddle. Even Nightmare seemed nervous in the vicinity of the ominous hill, so he wasted no time to leave.

Riding north, Sunny couldn't help but remember the Nightmare Gate near Rain's school. The abominations he had fought that day were called the Barrow Wraiths. Were they, perhaps, connected to the builders of these barrows?

…The next day, he saw sunlight for the first time in a long, long time.

At first, Sunny did not even realize what was happening, thinking that there was something wrong with his eyes. But then, he understood that he wasn't seeing things — the impenetrable darkness of the empty sky was indeed turning paler.

Stunned, he dismounted and sat on the ground, looking at the eastern horizon.

As the sky brightened, color slowly returned to the world. From black, to midnight blue, to pale lilac. And then, finally, beautiful magenta that gave way to a golden dawn.

The sun rose above the horizon like a chalice of divinity, illuminating the world.

'How strange.'

Sunny's face was wet.

He didn't even know why he was crying — he didn't feel particularly sad, or happy, or awed. It was just pleasant to witness something beautiful. To not be lost from light anymore.

His eyes had just grown accustomed to the peaceful darkness, perhaps.

'I've left the Forgotten Shore.'

He smiled.

Sunny was pretty sure that no other human had ventured that far north before. He had discovered a new region of the Dream Realm.

That meant that there would be Nightmare Creatures waiting for him in the unexplored wilderness. Still, he wasn't discouraged.

His reserves of food were running quite low, after all.

When the sun rose and the sky was painted grey, Sunny continued on

his way. This time, he was especially careful, knowing that unknown horrors could attack him at any moment.

Soon, a dark line appeared on the horizon. He assumed that there would be another mountain chain barring his path, but was proven wrong after getting closer.

Sitting in the saddle, Sunny looked ahead with an emotionless face.

Out there in front of him… a sea of jagged black pillars was rising into the sky, each as wide as a tower. It was as if countless dead giants were reaching toward the sky with twisted, skeletal fingers.

The pillars… were the blackened, broken trunks of great trees. He was looking at a destroyed forest of titanic proportions.

Sunny was struggling to imagine how tall the trees had been before they were broken and toppled, and how vast the forest was. All that he could tell was that it was a land meant for deities, not mortals.

Urging Nightmare forward, Sunny slowly entered the burned forest. Despite the thousands of years that had passed since it was devoured by flames, the scorched trees had not decayed and crumbled into dust. They were still intact, just broken — it was as if someone had vengefully shattered each one, so that none remained standing.

The broken trunks covered the ground, intertwined into an impassable disarray. Most of them were as wide as roads, stretching at steep angles or sloping down, into the dark depths of the deadfall. The layer of broken trees must have been several hundred meters thick, and there was no telling what hid in the gaps between the charred remains of the ancient trees.

Sunny had no desire to find out, so he sent Nightmare onto the nearest horizontal trunk.

Moving forward wasn't easy, since he often had to change directions, going up and down or jumping from one fallen tree to another.

A few hours later, Sunny encountered his first foe.

Chapter-1796: End of the World

It was a black, glistening millipede that lunged at him from under the deadfall. Its armored body was about three meters in length, as wide as an adult man's torso. Instead of a pair of mandibles, it had an eerily human mouth full of sharp, needle-like fangs.

The millipede was a Corrupted Beast.

Sunny did not move from the saddle and simply turned his head with a dark look. Before the creature could reach him, dark tentacles rose from the blackened surface of the dead tree and enveloped it, slamming the abomination down. Then, they moved like saws, their undersides turning into sharp blades.

A few heartbeats later, the millipede was sawn into a dozen bleeding chunks. It struggled weakly, and then grew still.

Sunny dismissed the shadows and stared at the gruesome remains incredulously. Then, he sighed and looked up.

"...I'm supposed to eat that?"

Before he could jump off the saddle to harvest the millipede's meat and soul shards, though, he sensed a tide of shadows moving in his direction.

Soon enough, the broken forest came alive. It looked as if a flood of darkness flowed from under the ancient trunks, rushing at him with terrible speed. A deafening rustle assaulted his ears.

Sunny cursed in a stifled voice.

The flood of darkness was not the second coming of the Dark Sea — instead, there were more millipedes slithering towards him. Thousands of them, at least, all of the same Rank and Class as the

first one.

Sunny was powerful. He was even powerful beyond belief, if compared to an average Saint. However, he was not inclined to battle a swarm of thousands of Corrupted Beasts.

Dismissing Nightmare, he turned into a shadow and fled. A moment later, the tide of millipedes flowed over the remains of their fallen sibling, and in a split second, the meat he had been reluctant to collect was gone. Not even a piece of black chitin remained.

Gliding away stealthily, Sunny let out a bitter, mental sigh.

'No wonder.'

No wonder none of the Sleepers of the Forgotten Shore had managed to find salvation by trying to reach another region of the Dream Realm. Even if they somehow managed to traverse thousands of kilometers of the crimson labyrinth, hiding from the Dark Sea at night, all that awaited them beyond the coral was death.

Hollow Mountains and Nightmare Desert were a death warrant. But this Burned Forest was not any better. It was another Death Zone.

Sunny had no doubt that there was no salvation west of the Forgotten Shore, either.

'...Doesn't matter.'

Leaving the swarm of millipedes behind, he continued to move north.

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It took Sunny a long time to make his way through the Burned Forest. He was quickly reminded that he was at the bottom of the food chain — after that first encounter with the swarm of Corrupted Beasts, he met many more Nightmare Creatures, most of them much more powerful than the millipedes were.

There were plenty of Great abominations on the outskirts of the forest… as for its depths, Sunny had not dared venturing there, moving instead in a wide circle.

He had evaded some and killed some. His food stores were replenished, but his body was in a sorry state. It was to the point where he had to remain in the form of a shadow for a while, using one of the avatars as the main vessel of his consciousness instead.

His incarnations were independent of each other, so if one received a wound, it was not reflected on the rest. Because of that, he could rotate them when there was a need, letting the damaged ones heal while the fresh ones fought.

That way, he managed to survive crossing the Burned Forest.

There were days when he moved, days when he rested, and days when he hid himself in the darkness, scouting the way ahead with utmost caution.

During one of such days, Sunny witnessed something that rattled him to the core.

As his shadow climbed on the taller remnant left behind by one of the burned trees, he could suddenly see deep into the forest, where an enormous depression in the earth was carpeted by broken trunks.

And in the middle of that vast plain stood a charred stump.

The sight of that stump left Sunny speechless.

Its size was truly unimaginable. The surface where the trunk of the colossal tree had broken off was vast enough to be considered a plateau. Each bulging, blackened root was like a mountain. The creases of the scorched bark were like deep valleys, and the shadows populating them were enough to drown entire cities.

Sunny could not imagine what could have destroyed such a tree. When it had stood whole, its crown must have brushed against the stars, and the sun must have passed between its branches, following the moon.

If there had truly been a world tree, then this had to be its corpse.

Somebody had annihilated it, complete with innumerable living beings that must have lived on its colossal branches.

'...I'm so small.'

Hidden far away, in a dark fissure between two fallen trunks, Sunny smiled darkly.

He was so far below the unimaginable tree, and the being who had destroyed it, that even thinking about himself in that context was preposterous.

For now, at least.

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Not long after that, Sunny continued his journey. He arduously made his way through the Burned Forest, and eventually left it behind.

By then, the sun did not rise at night anymore.

The sky was not entirely black, though. It was illuminated by countless stars, and although the moon did not show itself, he could see a ghostly radiance sometimes, as if it was hidden just out of sight.

The weather slowly turned more and more severe. Sunny was no stranger to cold, but still, he was starting to struggle slightly.

The ground was slowly devoured by ice. Sunny continued to move north, and at some point, he could not see ground at the bottom of the deep cracks in the ice anymore — instead, there was only water.

By then, he really felt as if he was approaching the edge of the world.

Sunny journeyed on, overcome by strange excitement.

Would he really reach the boundary of the Dream Realm? There was curvature to the horizon here, so reasonably, this strange world was supposed to be a sphere, just like Earth. So, he might end up entering the Stormsea from the south.

However, reason did not always work in the Dream Realm. So, Sunny could easily imagine that the world would just end, opening up into an endless dark abyss. Or maybe an infinity of billowing white mist… into nothing.

What would it feel like, to stand on the edge of the world and peer beyond?

Suffering from cold and lethal wind, Sunny stubbornly moved further north.

There was nothing around him anymore. No ruins, no Nightmare Creatures, no signs of ancient battles. Only the wind, the ice, and the stars.

But then, one day…

Something suddenly appeared in the distance. A shape that was different from all the rest, too orderly and smooth to not be artificial.

Barely containing his fascination, Sunny walked in that direction.

He moved closer and closer, until the strange structure finally revealed itself.

Sunny stumbled.

His weathered face suddenly froze. All traces of excitement were erased from it, replaced by a deep, powerful emotion that wasn't quite horror and wasn't quite shock, but very close to both.

He swayed slightly.

"Aaaah…"

A slow exhale slowly escaped from his lips.

Sunny sank to his knees.

Tears rolled from his eyes, turning into drops of ice.

"Here… it's here."

It was.

A bitter smile split his pale face apart.

Out there in front of him, hidden in the ice… stood a small

settlement. It was surrounded by a thick wall, which was now broken and covered in snow.

There was a large dome-like structure towering above the settlement, painted white against the backdrop of the starlit sky. It resembled a giant, perfectly smooth egg.

It was an observatory… a lunar observatory.

It was LO49.

Chapter-1797: Last Refuge

Sunny would have loved to be wrong. He would have liked to believe that he had lost his sanity from solitude and hopelessness. Or even that he had fallen under the effect of a strange mind hex.

That he was looking at an illusion conjured by some harrowing abomination.

But in his heart, he knew that his eyes weren't lying to him. Out there in front of him, buried in snow and ice, was indeed Lunar Observatory Forty-Nine — the research settlement where he had met Beth and Professor Obel once, during the Chain of Nightmares. Where Dusk of Fallen Grace killed everyone except for a handful of people that Sunny had taken away in time.

The dome of the old observatory was the same. The alloy wall was the same, even if its turrets had turned into ice sculptures. The empty buildings where the scientists, soldiers, and assisting personnel had once lived and worked were the same, too.

The research installation stood lonesomely under the starlit sky, drowning in snow.

Sunny shivered.

"H—how…"

But he knew how.

Wind Flower had warned him… she had told him that his world would be consumed by the Dream Realm one day, just like hers. He had known that it was inevitable for a long time.

However, Sunny had never thought that the process would have started so soon.

'I thought... we still... had time.'

He remained motionless for a while, taking in the eerie sight of the empty facility with an expression that went beyond despair.

It felt so wrong, to see alloy walls and prefab structures in the Dream Realm.

Appalling.

Sunny had no words to describe what he was feeling. He had left the waking world behind… and yet, witnessing the root of its future destruction had rattled him to the very core.

The dilapidated streets of the outskirts. The beautiful terrace district in the inner city. The fortress-like Awakened Academy. The prestigious school where Rain had studied. Everything he knew… would be swallowed by the Dream Realm soon.

Worse than that. All the places that formed the background of his memories would not just be transported to another world. They would become forgotten ruins — just the kind Sunny was fond of exploring. Weathered, forlorn, and teeming with revolting abominations.

That was the grim future of the world infected by the Nightmare Spell.

Only... there would be no one to explore the ruins of the waking world and wonder about the people who had populated them once. Because Sunny's realm was the last to be consumed. There would be no explorers left to remember their lives and struggles.

The waking world would cease to exist. Maybe not in a year, or even a decade…

But the process had already started.

Sunny did not know how long he had spent kneeling in the snow in front of the silent research station. Eventually, though, he shakily rose to his feet and walked toward the crumbled wall.

He spent some time wandering LO49 in a daze.

Back then, Sunny had left in a hurry. After delivering his cohort and the two civilians to safety, he mounted Nightmare and returned — but he did not enter the facility again, only looking at it from afar. Everyone was gone, taken by Dusk of Fallen Grace.

Even though Sunny killed the Terror later with the help of Naeve and Saint Bloodwave, the memory of the empty settlement was still connected to a feeling of powerlessness and deep, chilling fear in his heart.

Funnily enough, he felt the same way now.

Nothing seemed to have changed in LO49. There was some damage caused by the harsh environment, and the exteriors of the alloy buildings were covered in ice and snow. However, the interiors were in surprisingly good condition.

All the tech had stopped working, of course. But the material legacy was all there.

There were clothes, furniture, and decorations. Kitchen utensils, writing implements, and synthetic paper. The important data had been stored digitally, but many scientists had been in the habit of writing notes by hand or drawing complicated formulas on the boards.

There were also useless items people accumulated throughout their lives. Toys, trinkets, and sentimental mementoes. Posters, musical instruments, and handicrafts.

Some of it would decay with the passage of time. But actually, most of the things created by modern humans were quite lasting.

If someone unfamiliar with the civilization of the waking world visited this place in the future… what would they think about the people who had perished at LO49?

Would they think that the ancient people had been ingenious and worthy of admiration, excelling in craft and architecture? That they created enchanting art, pursued enlightenment, and were quite

knowledgeable about the arcane principles that governed the world?

Or that the ancient people had been warlike and austere, living in harsh conditions and surrounding their utilitarian homes by tall metal walls? After all, there were weapons and military uniforms everywhere in LO49, as well.

However, there were no corpses. No bones, no signs of a vicious battle. Nobody would know what had happened here, and at best, they would feel idle curiosity about the fate of the missing inhabitants.

About as much of it as Sunny had felt in the ruins of the Dark City, before it became vitaly important to learn the truth of it all.

There was a bitter taste in his mouth.

It was because Sunny knew better than most what it meant to be forgotten.

Sometimes, not being remembered was worse than death.

'Ah. I hate it.'

Still unable to come to terms with the dreadful revelation, he remained motionless for a while, and then left the settlement to wander around.

It was strange.

The research facility was how it had been. Some of its surroundings were familiar, too…

But the rest was not.

The ocean shore might have been hidden under the ice, but the mountains were definitely missing. After exploring the area more thoroughly, Sunny made sure that he wasn't mistaken.

He had almost expected to find the entire Antarctica here, but somehow, it was nowhere to be found. There were no mountains, no highways, no underground base that he had used as shelter after

meeting Gere and his small convoy of refugees.

Instead, there was just an endless plain of ice.

It was as if a small chunk had been torn out of the waking world and transported here, then stitched to the patchwork realm of nightmares.

No matter how long Sunny looked, he did not find another.

Still… the Dream Realm was vast.

There could be more pieces of Antarctica lost somewhere in the ice. Other areas could be elsewhere… Sunny would not be surprised if it turned out that a piece of America was now drifting somewhere in Stormsea, or that parts of Europe could be found west of the Forgotten Shore.

There was no point in continuing the search anymore. Nothing would change if he found another fragment of the waking world here.

Sunny looked south, where LO49 was hidden in the darkness.

Then, he looked north, at the endless expanse of ice.

The desire to explore the unknown that had pushed him forward so far… was inexplicably gone, doused by the grim discovery.

Letting out a sigh, he summoned the Marvellous Mimic, commanded it to turn into a hut, and went inside.

His mind was numb, and his heart was cold.

So, Sunny decided to sleep.

Chapter-1798: Knowledge of Everything

When Sunny woke up, reality was the same. His dreams did not change the cold, ruthless truth.

He had wondered a lot what he would find at the edge of this alien world, but never expected to find the end of his own.

Sunny slowly sat up and stared at the wall with an absent expression.

…Would he still be alone in this frozen wasteland when his crumbling world became one with the spreading Dream Realm?

Reality was the same, but he was not.

It wasn't unexpected, to change after witnessing something so shocking. He had mused about how small he was in comparison to the colossal stump in the Burned Forest. But only witnessing the white dome of LO49 under the strange sky had really put his entire life in perspective.

Sunny was quite a self-centered person. He wasn't a narcissist or someone who had no empathy for anyone except himself, but he cared about himself more than he did about others. There were a few people out there he would die for — but even then, it was because they were dear to him, and their loss would hurt him terribly.

Only those who had not suffered before were oblivious enough to be truly selfless. People who had experienced anguish and pain knew the value of selfishness, because caring about oneself meant not having to suffer that anguish again.

So, Sunny was a reasonably selfish man. He was also a man who had experienced all kinds of torment, witnessed great tragedies, and

endured it all to continue walking forward.

Still, even he could not remain unmoved in the face of the destruction of his world, and the extinction of his kind.

'She was right... knowledge is indeed the heaviest thing in the world.'

The winds were howling beyond the walls of the empty hut. The sky was cold and dark. Pale starlight bathed the desolate expanse of ice, reflecting from it in a ghostly radiance.

Some distance away, the dome of LO49 stood lonesomely above the snow.

Sunny let out a long sigh.

He did not want to, but had no choice except to reevaluate a lot of things. Very important things, including the very concept of the future and his own place in its frightening reach.

In fact, even though Sunny did not know what to think yet, he felt that he had already made a few decisions.

It was just that he had not realized these decisions yet.

Life… was so messy.

He had gone to Antarctica in search of conviction, thinking that his own was lacking. He did not find what he was looking for there, but instead learned that his own beliefs and aspirations were in no way inferior to anyone else's.

Sunny had also learned to despise the Sovereigns in Antarctica. The callous ghouls who played their games while countless people died, even though they could extend a hand and save them.

He wanted to make his will known and if not punish the tyrants, then at least prevent their hidden conflict from causing too much collateral damage among the civilian population. He did a few things to realize that goal, but before his efforts truly bore fruit, the Battle of the Black Skull happened.

And then, Sunny was thrown into the Third Nightmare.

What happened in the Tomb of Ariel… well. He made a proper mess of everything, and then somehow solved it, as well. But the way he solved it was more damaging than the Nightmare itself.

However, those… those were his personal issues. They had nothing to do with the Sovereigns, what he had wanted to do in Antarctica, and the fate of the world.

And by the time he returned, the Sovereigns had already made their move, and the Southern Campaign was over. Those refugees that had not been evacuated across the ocean fled into the Dream Gates, and left the waking world. Sunny's immediate goal had no meaning anymore.

Sunny himself, meanwhile… was abandoned by the world. He was forgotten, expelled, and erased from existence. Untethered from everyone, and everything. Completely lost.

So, he left.

He left and never looked back, crossing the Hollow Mountains, the Forgotten Shore, and the Burned Forest in solitude. All to leave the world that had rejected him behind…

Only to find a piece of that world at the end of the journey.

What was he supposed to do now?

Should he continue to pretend that nothing of what was happening to humanity had anything to do with him now?

Should he continue to hide, keep his own company, and slowly lose his mind?

Should he continue going north?

Just yesterday, Sunny was full of excitement at the thought of exploring the uncharted parts of the Dream Realm.

But today, he did not care anymore. The thrill was gone, replaced by

a heavy emptiness.

Summoning the Endless Spring, Sunny drank some water, sighed, and then absent-mindedly looked at the beautiful glass bottle.

That Memory of his had served him well over the years.

It was a gift from someone who didn't remember him anymore.

His expression turned cold.

...Of course, there was a different choice to be made, and a different destiny to be carved out.

Instead of heading north, he could turn around and go back.

He could return.

'And then what?'

Nobody remembered him. Nephis, Cassie, Effie, Kai, Jet, Rain… Teacher Julius, Saint Tyris, Beth… and everyone else.

They did not think or care about someone they did not know.

But Sunny remembered.

'When I go back… if I go back… I'll have to do a few tricky things.'

By now, he was powerful enough not to be a mere spectator. Why did he have to simply watch the ruthless players move the figures across the board? Instead, he could exert his influence to personally change the game.

A person like him could do a lot when no one was looking his way. The idea of confronting the Sovereigns seemed like pure madness before. It still did, but was it, really?

Could Sunny exert his will and reshape the world to fit his desires?

He would have to plot the downfall of Anvil of Valor and Ki Song.

There was the third one, as well… perhaps the most dangerous of the

three.

But dealing with the Sovereigns was only the beginning.

Now that the destruction of everything was accelerating, there was only one way — forward, to the very end. Either the Nightmare Spell would swallow humanity, or be conquered by humans.

Supreme, Sacred, Divine.

The end could only be stopped if new gods were born of humanity. Therefore, that was what Sunny had to ensure… if he went back.

Did he dare to dream it?

A long time ago, Nephis had proclaimed her determination to conquer every Nightmare. Sunny had thought that she was insane back then.

The wind was growing colder outside.

He remained silent for a long time, listening to its howling.

'...So what if it's insane?'

Sunny was not quite healthy in the mental department himself. He had not been for a long time.

He did dare to dream it. At this point, there was very little that he did not dare to do.

Walking out of the door, Sunny looked at the sky.

The sky was full of stars.

'I am nobody. And I have nothing.'

He inhaled the frigid air and looked south with a cold, dark gleam in his lightless eyes.

'So let's change everything.'

With that, he dismissed the Marvellous Mimic and reached into his

soul, which was still tethered to the waking world.

Soon, his figure disappeared from the sea of starlit ice.

…Instead, a ragged silhouette appeared on a desolate street in the outskirts of NQSC, surrounded by a whirlwind of dancing snowflakes.

Chapter-1799: Back to Civilization

Sunny returned to the outskirts.

After years spent in the wild reaches of the Dream Realm, NQSC was like an explosion. Sunny almost fell to the ground after being assaulted by a myriad of movements and sensations. There were sounds, scents, and countless scenes. Most of all, there were shadows... a vast legion of them, all moving and changing, surrounding him like a boundless whirlpool.

Overwhelmed by them, he spent several days hiding in an abandoned room at the top of a ramshackle dormitory hive.

His mind wasn't ready for the sensory overload of being among hundreds of millions of people — subduing his shadow sense, he waited for a while, slowly preparing himself to face humanity again.

Gradually, Sunny let his senses loose. First to envelop a few levels of the dormitory hive, then all of it. Laying in the darkness, he could feel thousands of humans go about their harsh lives, observing their sorrows, joys, and struggles.

Then, his shadow sense extended outward, enveloping the outskirts one street after another.

At some point, Sunny felt as if he was an invisible, omniscient deity. The area he could perceive was too vast for his mind to concentrate on each shadow, to witness every person — and yet, there was no better way of throwing himself into the half-forgotten feeling of being human.

Slowly, the feral grip of solitude that the Dream Realm had on his mind loosened. Sunny remembered how to be a person again.

His status in the waking world was… questionable. He didn't really exist. A nice family was now living in his terrace district house. He had no money, no citizenship, and no home.

Which was pretty much exactly how it had been, back in the days of living as an outskirt rat.

A very familiar situation.

Of course, Sunny himself was entirely different from his younger self. He was a Saint now, which meant that he wasn't just a rat... he was the strongest, most vicious and fearsome rat in the world. The loftiest rat there was.

A true rat king.

The outskirts themselves had changed, as well. They were much emptier, as if someone had culled the population of this miserable place in the past few years. Sunny knew that many of the most disenfranchised people of the waking world had been seduced by the lure of the Dream Gates — one of his incarnations had followed Rain to Ravenheart, after all. But knowing and seeing were two different things.

'Even this place can change, huh.'

He felt... uprooted, somehow. But it was a good thing, for this part of his past to have changed.

Moving in the shadows, Sunny found a better place to stay and thoroughly washed himself. Then, he procured a cheap communicator and a sizable sum of credits. Things that had been insurmountable for him as a kid were easier than breathing now. He did not have to scrounge for food and shelter. He did not have to fear the other humans populating the city slums.

He could survive here with no effort whatsoever… live as lavishly as he wanted, even.

But what was the point if the world was already falling apart?

Sunny did not care about the bitter past. It had no hold over him

anymore.

He… had outgrown the outskirts.

After getting himself in order, Sunny sighed, turned into a shadow, and reached for the tether.

His original body was still tethered to the Ivory Island… of course, the Ivory Island had long left the Chained Isles by now, and the Crushing was no more.

With its departure, the force keeping the flying islands afloat had weakened significantly, accelerating the demise of the region. The Sanctuary of Noctis was situated at the edge of the Chained Isles, so it was still safe. However, more and more islands fell into the Sky Below with each year. In a few decades, most likely, there would be none left, erasing the last remains of the Kingdom of Hope.

Except for the Ivory Tower itself.

Sunny had expected to find himself above Bastion, but it seemed that Nephis and Cassie had been sent out to accomplish a mission. The beautiful island was moving across the sky of the Sword Domain, and the Fire Keepers were preparing for battle.

Sunny did not disturb them and jumped off the edge, unnoticed.

Turning into a crow, he glided to the ground and watched the Ivory Island drift away.

Then, with a sigh, he summoned Nightmare and climbed into the saddle.

Funnily enough, his destination was in the north.

Sunny had plenty of time to consider the situation while getting his bearings in the outskirts, and although he did not have a concrete plan yet, he knew that one place would play a great role in the approaching war.

A Death Zone known as Godgrave.

So, that was where he headed.

Of course, to get there, he had to cross most of the Sword Domain first.

Strangely enough, the journey was relaxing.

Sunny had spent so much time braving the deadliest regions of the Dream Realm that the territories conquered by humans seemed peaceful and safe. As long as he remained vigilant, nothing here could seriously threaten him.

Granted, the Dream Realm was still dire and full of dangers. Overconfidence was still an insidious killer, and one mistake could cost him his life. It was just that the scale of that mistake had to be quite significant now.

Nevertheless, Sunny enjoyed the feeling of being at the top of the food chain. He rode Nightmare while four of his shadows served as a stealthy vanguard, circling him at a distance. That way, he was alerted of any danger long before it could pose a threat.

Sunny avoided the human settlements, but sent his shadows to observe them and collect the news from time to time. He was learning more about the current situation in the two worlds, and slowly working out the basics of a plan.

…A couple of weeks later, a mountain chain barred his path. It was much less impressive than the dreaded expanse of the Hollow Mountains, but still had a bad reputation. When Sunny was a small child, these mountains were the northern boundary of the human enclave in the Dream Realm.

After Valor's northward expansion, though, they were simply a natural barrier in the heart of the Sword Domain now.

Sunny studied them with a slightly surprised expression. Not because of their historical significance, but for an entirely different reason.

These mountains…

'No way.'

He recognized them.

The steep rocky slopes were barren, and sharp ridges were covered in snow. There was one mountain that towered above the rest, though…

Jagged and lonesome, it dwarfed other peaks of the mountain chain, cutting the night sky with its sharp edges. A radiant moon bathed its slopes in the ghostly, pale light.

It was the Black Mountain from his First Nightmare.

Chapter-1800: Return to the Black Mountain

Sunny often thought about the slave caravan, but he never actually tried to learn more about the events that had transpired in the Nightmare.

He knew that they had happened at the dusk of the Golden Age, not long before the start of the Doom War. Back then, the gods had grown indifferent and distant, and the soldiers of an expansionist empire that worshipped War wiped out the Shadow cult, burning down all its temples.

However, he did not know much about that empire and the lands it had conquered. The history of the Dream Realm was overshadowed by the calamitous destruction of the Doom War, and while it was possible to learn a thing or two about the previous eras, the devastation had erased most traces of the last human civilizations.

So, Sunny had never actually expected to behold the Black Mountain again.

He stared at its distant peak in bewilderment. Then, a sense of subtle curiosity bloomed in his heart.

'...Might as well take a look.'

Sunny actually felt a hint of sentimentality.

Back then, it took the caravan days to scale the mountain pass. Sunny remembered the agony of walking up the mountain road vividly — the cold, the pain, the biting touch of the iron shackles that shredded his wrists. He had felt so tired and weak, not knowing if he would survive the cruel march.

Many of the slaves had not, and ended up being tossed off the cliff after falling into the snow.

It was a hard thing, to climb a mountain while hungry and on the verge of freezing.

Today, Sunny simply stepped into the shadows and appeared halfway up the slope.

Step, step, and another step.

Just like that, he was standing below the towering edifice of the Black Mountain.

Thousands of years had passed since the day the slave caravan was destroyed. The mountain road had already been old and crumbling back then — now, no trace of it remained.

For a few moments, Sunny contemplated staying here for a while to find the old bones. He was curious to know what had actually happened to the nameless slave and Auro of the Nine. Had they escaped the Mountain King? Or had they perished?

He was quite certain that Auro had survived. But what about the young temple slave?

However, Sunny quickly dismissed that idea.

It would take him months, or maybe even years, to dig through the snow and find the traces of the caravan — if any traces remained. Even then, there was no guarantee that he would be able to tell anything about the past from them.

So, with a sigh, Sunny looked up, at the peak of the Black Mountain.

The only place he could visit was the mysterious temple that had stood there, surrounded by bones.

But before that…

He could feel enemies rushing at him from all sides. A moment later, the snow exploded, and hideous figures lunged at him with frenzy

burning in their milky-white eyes.

The slaughter was swift and ruthless.

Sunny did not even summon a weapon, using the spiked gauntlets of the Onyx Mantle to crush the abominations. He danced between them like an omen of death, coldly and methodically destroying one after another.

Until none remained.

The snow was painted red by blood, and a fine crimson haze hung in the air.

'Huh.'

Sunny studied the broken corpses, which littered the ground like a carpet. The creatures were hideous and appalling, resembling something that a mad artist would paint after waking up from a feverish nightmare. Most of them were Fallen Beasts and Monsters… and although he was sure that he had never fought such creatures before, they reminded him of something.

Mostly because he had subjugated a legion of Mountain King's Larvae in Antarctica not too long ago.

Although these abominations were different and much more powerful, they resembled the Larvae a lot.

Sunny smiled faintly.

'Will I be reunited with the Mountain King?'

If that thing wasn't dead, it would have grown much more powerful by now…

But no, the chances were slim. The forces of Valor had eradicated the most dangerous Nightmare Creatures in this area of the Dream Realm during their march north, and they would not have tolerated a powerful Tyrant remaining in their rear.

Even if the Mountain King had survived the thousands of years

without leaving the Black Mountain, he would have been dealt with by someone like Whispering Blade, or maybe even Anvil himself.

With a sigh, Sunny took another step through the shadows and appeared directly on the peak of the Black Mountain.

He stood there motionlessly for a while, looking ahead with an expression of awe on his pale face.

The nameless temple… was still there, under the moonlit sky.

At the highest point of the mountain, a vast expanse of flat rock was covered with snow. In the center of it, illuminated by moonlight, stood a magnificent temple. Its colossal columns and walls were cut from black marble, with exquisite reliefs decorating the stygian pediment and broad frieze. Beautiful and awesome, it looked like a palace of a dark god.

At least it did once. Now, the temple was in ruins: fractures and cracks marred the black stones, parts of the roof had collapsed, letting in ice and snow. Its tall gates were broken, as if smashed into pieces by the hand of a giant.

The black temple did not change at all. It was as if thousands of years had no effect on it whatsoever.

The only thing that changed was that now, there were even more bones surrounding it. There were thousands of bones scattered around, carpeting the ground. Some belonged to Nightmare Creatures, while some seemed to be quite human.

Come to think of it…

'Why are there so many bones here?'

Was this where the Mountain King had devoured its victims? Somehow, Sunny doubted it. The Tyrant had consumed the slaves right where he had killed them, after all.

No, before that.

What was this temple, exactly?

Back then… Sunny remembered Scholar mentioning that pilgrims used to climb the mountain in the ancient times. Who were these pilgrims, and what had they worshipped?

He had assumed that this was one of the Shadow God's temples that the Empire had destroyed, but the timing did not make sense. The destruction of the Shadow cult was a recent event during his First Nightmare… however, the temple looked as if it had been ruined thousands of years ago even then.

And when Sunny spilled his blood on the altar, the Spell described it as an offering to all the gods. It was just that Shadow had been the only one to answer.

Stranger still…

The gods had still been alive at the time of the Nightmare. And yet, the Spell spoke of them as dead.

Sunny shivered.

Had his offering… reached the actual gods, and not a substitute of them put in place by the Spell? Was the Spell even capable of creating illusory copies of the gods?

Probably not.

If so, what did it mean? And how had Shadow God granted him a blessing from beyond the grave?

Well… that last part wasn't that surprising. The gods were the ones who had created things like time and death, after all. So, it wasn't strange to imagine that they had a special relationship with these laws. A god could very well respond to a question before it was asked, and bless a slave who had offered himself as a sacrifice despite being dead.

Especially if that altar stood in a very special place.

The black temple…

Sunny hesitated, unsure of what to think. Now that he had found the

ruined temple again, he realized that he didn't actually know anything about it.

He was certain of one thing, though. This place…

It felt sacred.

A sense of solemn, silent sanctity was emanating from the obsidian walls of the ancient temple. It looked majestic and beautiful in the moonlight, and although the ground around the ruin was littered with bones, it did not feel vile or ominous at all.

With a sigh, Sunny headed toward the broken gates of the temple.

And as he was approaching…

He felt it.

He did not see it, and he did not hear it. He did not even perceive it with his shadow sense.

But somehow, he knew.

There was something in front of him… a vast, invisible, intangible being. One that was reaching out to him, emanating a subtle sense of purity, loneliness, and power.

Suddenly, Sunny realized why there were bones scattered everywhere at the peak of the Black Mountain.

However, the guardian of the temple did not seem to hold any malice toward him. Instead, there was a sense of… joy, and recognition.

The invisible being was reaching out to something in Sunny's soul.

The golden light… the flame of divinity.

Sunny's eyes widened a little.

'I… I didn't even know.'

Back then, he had felt nothing when entering the temple. But the bones had been there, which meant that the guardian had been there,

as well. And yet, it let Sunny in instead of adding his corpse to the pile of bones.

Because it had sensed a faint mark of divinity on his soul.

…The Mountain King, too. Since the Tyrant entered the temple, it must have been touched by divinity once, as well.

Sunny had not known how close to death he had come, and how lucky he was to survive.

'Would it let me pass now?'

Taking a deep breath, Sunny looked forward, and stepped through the gates of the nameless temple.

Chapter-1801: A New Home

Sunny crossed the threshold and entered the great hall of the ancient temple.

It was just as he remembered it.

The vast hall was desolate and empty. Its roof had partially collapsed, letting in the elements. There were piles of rubble on the floor, covered with snow and ice. Cascades of moonlight were falling through the holes in the roof, suffusing the dark hall with a beautiful and otherworldly splendor… deep shadows surrounded the silver light, not daring to touch it.

Everything was silent.

Sunny took a deep breath.

He had almost expected to find the bones of the Mountain King on the floor, where it had been torn apart by shadow, but there were none. The desolate hall was empty.

Enveloping the temple with shadow sense to make sure that there was no danger, Sunny took a step forward. Ice shattered with a brittle sound under the onyx soles of his armored boots, and the ancient shadows stirred, reaching out to him in reverent glee.

Surrounded by them, as if wearing a cloak of darkness, he walked toward the altar.

It used to be a single slab of black marble, long and wide enough for a human to lay on it comfortably…

Or maybe not so comfortably, if it had been a sacrificial altar.

Was it?

It didn't matter now, anyway, because the altar was broken.

The great slab of black stone had shattered, and was laying on the floor in several pieces. That was the only thing in the temple that had changed.

Sunny studied the broken altar for a while, his face slowly growing paler.

There were too many mysteries surrounding this place. He concentrated, trying to remember everything he knew about the First Nightmare, the dead gods, and the secrets of the fallen pantheon.

And then, his eyes widened.

Of all the knowledge Sunny had learned in his life, of all the pieces of information gathered in his memory, one suddenly stood out. A memory that Sunny had never considered very significant, and had no reason to.

It was the evaluation the Spell had given him after the First Nightmare. Not the important part that had to do with the appraisal, but rather the slightly poetic summary that had been there seemingly on a whim, to add some flavor.

Standing above the broken altar, Sunny whispered:

"A nameless slave ascended the Black Mountain. Both heroes and monsters fell by his hand. Unbroken, he entered the ruined temple of a long-forgotten god and spilled his blood on the sacred altar. The gods were dead, and yet they listened."

The temple of a long-forgotten god…

He inhaled deeply.

Back then, Sunny had been an ignorant kid from the outskirts. He knew very little about the world, let alone about its greatest secrets.

He had not known who the Forgotten God was, and so, he had not paid attention to these words. The Spell had never uttered them after that, and neither used nor translated the runes describing the lost

deity.

'...Of course.'

Sunny looked around the ruined temple.

Why had his sacrifice been made to all the gods?

Perhaps because this temple had been built in the time before the memories of the seventh god were struck from the world. It was consecrated to worship Dream God, as well… and therefore, when Dream God became forgotten, the temple was forgotten, as well.

Because worshiping the Forgotten God was forbidden. Just like worshiping the daemons, his children, was.

Still… Sunny was sure that there were some who had disregarded the will of the gods and put their faith in Forgotten God despite it. Otherwise, Scholar would not have heard stories of pilgrims climbing the Black Mountain in ancient times.

'The temple of the Forgotten God…'

Sunny looked around the great hall with a complicated expression.

He was himself forgotten by the world, so it wasn't hard to feel a sense of kinship for this forlorn ruin.

He sighed and threw one last glance at the altar.

There were deep shadows nestling deep below him, so Sunny knew that the temple extended underground. He had never got the chance to explore it during the First Nightmare, so it was nice to have an opportunity now. He was curious to see what he would find out.

Still, he would leave this place and continue toward Godgrave soon. There was no time to waste.

Before that, however…

Sunny froze.

It was because he had felt something familiar when looking at the broken altar.

'Wait. No way. Can it be?'

The shattered slab of black marble gave off a subtle, but very familiar feeling.

Sunny stared silently.

…It was a Gateway.

He had missed that fact at first, but now that he studied the broken altar closer, there was no doubt. It felt exactly like the one in the Sanctuary of Noctis, the chain circle in the Ivory Tower, and the runic one in the Crimson Spire.

And if the altar had been made into a Gateway…

Sunny looked around once more.

Then the nameless temple was now a Citadel.

Suddenly, he wanted to laugh.

'How fitting.'

He was a Transcendent, and a homeless one at that. Most Saints, however, were usually in control of a Citadel, ruling it at the behest of their Sovereign.

There were exceptions, of course, like Saint Tyris, who had lost the Sanctuary of Noctis and had been exiled to Antarctica with her entire clan. Fortunately, White Feather was doing much better now.

Sunny himself served no Sovereign, and he wasn't even sure if he could take possession of a Citadel. Citadels were created by the Spell, after all… so, he didn't know if controlling one was something that only a carrier of the Spell could do.

It was worth trying, though.

He hesitated for a while.

Then, he hesitated some more.

'Right. But how do I actually claim a Citadel?'

If there was an instruction manual for being a Saint, Sunny had never received one.

After thinking for a while, he retracted the Onyx Mantle, bared his forearm, and commanded the Onyx Shell to reduce the resilience of his skin there. Then, he cut his forearm with his fingernail.

Nothing happened.

Letting out a frustrated sigh, Sunny also commanded Blood Weave to release a few drops of blood.

Why was it so difficult to bleed a little?!

Several crimson drops fell on the broken altar and rolled down the surface of one of the black shards.

There was no reaction.

Once again, nothing happened.

Sunny scratched the back of his head. The small cut on his forearm was already healing, and before too long, it was entirely gone.

At that time, he also came up with another idea.

'It can't be that simple, can it?'

Feeling uncertain, Sunny took a deep breath… and silently released the tether connecting him to the Ivory Tower.

Then, he concentrated on his soul and started the process of placing a new one.

He had a suspicion that it was very simple to claim a Citadel. All that a carrier of the Nightmare Spell had to do was become a Transcendent and use the Gateway to return to the waking world.

Then, they would become anchored to that Gateway, and therefore, take possession of the Citadel.

Unless it was already claimed, of course, in which case a more powerful Saint would take control.

However, Sunny was not a carrier of the Nightmare Spell, so he had to go through the process manually. Instead of allowing the Spell to bind him to the Gateway, he had to create that bond himself.

And so… he was placing down a tether.

Chapter-1802: Restoration

The concept called "tether" by Masters and Saints was a mysterious, but simple thing. It was a sort of imprint one could leave on the world by using their essence. The spot marked by the imprint was where one's soul was anchored to the world — Masters could only imprint themselves on the waking world, but Saints could imprint themselves on the Dream Realm, as well.

In addition to that, the tethers placed by Saints were much more expansive and deeply rooted in the fabric of the realm than those placed by Masters. In fact, Sunny was quite certain that they were entirely different things — it was just that both served the same purpose, so humans just used the same word for both.

The reason why Transcendent tethers were so much more robust than the Ascended ones was because of the nature of Saints. The soul of a Saint was connected to the world, and so, it interacted with the world much closer.

For example, Saints could absorb spirit essence from their surroundings.

In rare cases, they could also pour their soul essence out into the world.

There was no need to mention how vital the former was, but the latter was more or less useless. The soul essence would swiftly dissipate if it wasn't poured into a special vessel — like a Memory, for example.

However, one time when pushing one's own essence onto the world was necessary was the process of creating a tether.

If manipulated in a special way, the essence would leave an imprint on the area where it had been unleashed before dissipating. That

imprint was the tether, and since it maintained a faint connection with the Saint's soul, it was possible to pull on the connection to step between realms and return to the place where one's soul was imprinted.

Only two tethers could exist at a time, one in each world. It was necessary to break the connection with the old one before creating a new one… well, in Sunny's case, each of his incarnations could place two of their own.

Regardless, that was what Sunny was doing now — he was pushing his essence into the world and controlling its flow to create an imprint. The process took some time, and was quite arduous.

However, he was not doing it blindly.

Instead of allowing his essence to cover the area freely, he tried to concentrate all of it in an isolated spot. Namely… the Gateway of the ancient temple.

Soon, his tether started to take form.

And then, something unexpected happened.

There seemed to be a strange reaction between the Gateway and the forming tether. It was as if the two had been created to exist together all along — not only did the strain on Sunny lessen significantly, as if the process had taken on a life of its own, but he also felt as if the imprint was becoming deeper, and also different in some way.

At the same time, Sunny felt something changing within his soul.

It was as if a mystical bond was being established, connecting him to the ancient temple.

He… he felt very strange.

Diving into the Soul Sea, Sunny saw that the vast expanse of still water was still no more. Instead, it was surging, boiling almost, with great waves rolling on the dark surface.

As if someone had thrown a huge boulder into the black water,

sending ripples spreading across the silent expanse of his soul.

'What…'

As Sunny watched, astounded, the water at the very heart of the Soul Sea suddenly foamed.

And then, a familiar black edifice rose from beneath the waves.

A perfect replica of the nameless temple — how it had been before its roof collapsed, and its gates were broken — slowly rose from the lightless depths of his soul, bathing in the dark radiance of his six soul cores.

Soon enough, the surging waters calmed down, and the Soul Sea grew still and silent once more. It was as if nothing had happened.

Only… there was a great temple of black stone standing on the still water now.

Sunny stared at it with wide eyes.

'...I'll be damned.'

That was… pretty cool.

He regretted not being connected to the Spell once more. Sunny could feel a deep connection to his newly claimed Citadel, but did not know what he could do with that connection, and what it was meant for. If he was still a carrier of the Spell, there would be helpful runes to guide him to the necessary understanding, without a doubt.

But then again, the Spell did not even explain the enchantments of the Memories it created to most Awakened. Who knew how helpful it would have been in the case of a Citadel?

Sunny knew that he would have to explore and investigate this matter personally.

Until then, however…

'What do I even do now?'

He had not been planning to come in possession of an unknown Citadel. Ruling one was not in his plans — right now, he was in the middle of traveling to Godgrave.

After hesitating for a while, Sunny sighed.

"Well, whatever. I can spend a few days here. Having a secret lair to return to wouldn't hurt, anyway."

His original body was anchored in the Nameless Temple now. So, he had no choice but to consider it in his future plans.

There was one silver lining to the unexpected situation, though.

At least, Sunny wasn't homeless anymore.

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Several days later, Sunny was sitting on the steps of the Nameless Temple. The sun was traveling across the clear blue sky, and the snow covering the mountain peak was shining with its light.

There was a stunned expression on his face.

The other five incarnations were resting on the lower steps, panting heavily. One was tiredly rubbing his shoulders. Another was leaning on a broom made by manifesting shadows. A third one was sprawled on the black stone, lazily staring at the sky. There was one who was pouring dirty water out of a bucket, and another one who was looking at them with disdain.

They had been busy cleaning up the temple for the last few days.

The cleanup was mostly finished, but the reconstruction had not even begun. Sunny knew that he would need special stone to rebuild the broken roof… he could scavenge some from the ruined cathedral of the Dark City. Durable wood for the beams. Would he have to visit the Burned Forest again to harvest some?

Luckily, he was good at all things having to do with craftsmanship, not only because of experience and practice, but also because of Bone Weave. His fingers were dexterous and responsive, like those of a

master artisan. Any tool he needed, meanwhile, could be manifested from the shadows.

However, the scope of the work that had to be done to restore the Nameless Temple to a decent state was not the reason why Sunny was spacing out right now.

Instead, the reason was the discovery made by his original body.

While the avatars had been busy with cleaning, he had explored his new Citadel. Of course, he had discovered the mystical circle in the undertemple almost immediately.

However, it took him a while to figure out what that Component did.

The instinctual understanding of its purpose was hidden in the connection Sunny shared with the Citadel.

'So… it can move.'

He raised his gaze and studied the desolate mountain peak.

Sunny assumed that the Nameless Temple had been built here, and wondered what madness forced the builders to carry the great weight of black marble to the top of a towering mountain.

But now, he knew that the ancient temple had been built elsewhere, and had stood elsewhere, before appearing on this mountain peak one day.

He also knew that it could move again, now that it had an owner once more.

Slowly, a bold idea formed in his mind.

Sunny lingered for a while, then looked at his avatars and studied each one for a few moments.

Eventually, his gaze landed on the gloomy incarnation.

He smiled.

'...Let's do it this way, then.'

***

Some time later, a sudden commotion disturbed the deadly peace of Godgrave. A dark figure in an onyx armor reached the edge of the dead god's breastbone, covered in ash and blood. Behind him was a trail of severed flesh and broken bodies.

The man's face was hidden behind a ferocious mask carved from black wood.

Standing on the precipice of an abyssal drop, he gazed down silently, paying no heed to a wave of abominations rushing at him from behind.

Then, a great temple built of black marble was suddenly standing on the bone plain.

As the man wearing the demonic mask turned, three warriors clad in the same onyx armor walked out of the darkness under the eaves of the black temple. A graceful stone knight followed, wielding a black blade and a round shield. Then, a silvery fiend forged in the flames of hell, a tenebrous steed shrouded in the mantle of nightmares, and an enormous serpent with onyx scales.

The dark dwellers of the black temple faced the tide of abominations calmly, and a few moments later, more blood flowed on the white surface of the ancient bone. A great darkness spread, hiding the battlefield from the cloudy sky.

At the same time, far away…

A young mundane girl was being taught how to slay Nightmare Creatures by an eccentric shadow.

And further still…

A trade caravan was approaching Bastion. Dozens of heavily loaded wagons were rolling down the road, pushed by monstrous Echoes. A sizable force of Awakened was flanking the caravan, protecting it from the dangers of the Dream Realm.

Their expressions were clear now that the lake city was in view.

A handsome young man with porcelain skin and onyx eyes was sitting on the bed of one of the wagons, leaning his back against a wooden crate and looking ahead with a beautiful smile on his lips. He didn't seem that strong, and wore an elegant black mantle instead of durable armor.

Far away, the awesome silhouette of a great castle was slowly revealing itself from the shimmering waters of a clear lake.

The young man looked at it for a while, then glanced down, at his shadow.

"It seems that we've arrived."

The shadow stared back at him, then shrugged indifferently.

He smiled.

"...Yes, I think so too."

Saying that, the young man looked up, at the silhouette of a white tower floating in the air above the castle.

His face turned wistful for a moment, and then he looked away with a quiet sigh.

"Ah, it's so pretty... damnation!"

Chapter-1803: After the Fighting is Over

Back in the courtyard of the Nameless Temple, Cassie let out a heavy sigh and looked away, hiding her eyes. Sunny remained silent, waiting for her to come to her senses.

He hesitated for a few moments, then moved his chair back. The tea had grown cold; the refreshments did not look appetizing anymore.

The leaves of the lonesome tree rustled peacefully in the darkness.

After a while, Cassie's shoulders trembled.

"It has already begun…"

Her voice was distant.

Sunny lingered for a few moments.

This time, the memory he had shown her was not nearly as long as the previous one. The awesome desolation of the Burned Forest and the mysterious nature of the Nameless Temple were memorable and distinct — however, as expected, what had affected Cassie the most was the sight of LO49.

Of course, she would not know anything about that lunar observatory in particular. But it was unmistakably a modern building — there was no place for it in the Dream Realm. Knowing that, she would have instantly understood the meaning.

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"You didn't know?"

She shook her head slowly.

He studied her delicate face, then let out a soft sigh.

Finally, there was something he knew that Cassie didn't. However, that did not bring him any joy.

After remaining silent for a while, he said neutrally:

"It was an old lunar observatory. LO49. It used to stand on the southern edge of the Antarctic Center — well, designated south, at least. Obviously, every direction there is technically north of the pole."

Sunny paused for a moment, and then added:

"The staff and soldiers who were garrisoned there were wiped out during the early stages of the Chain of Nightmares, and nobody has seen LO49 since. I am the last human to have visited Antarctica, I think. But I never went that far south. So, I don't know when the observatory was swallowed by the Dream Realm."

He smiled darkly.

"It would be a bit funny… if it wasn't so terrifying. While wandering the Sword Domain, I often felt that it was safer than some parts of our own world. Now, the difference between the two realms is even more vague. Soon enough, there will be none."

Cassie did not respond, sitting motionlessly in the darkness. Eventually, she said in a quiet tone:

"I'm sorry… I need to process the news…"

Sunny leaned back and allowed her to think in silence. After a while, he said evenly:

"Does it change anything, though?"

The war was still coming.

Finally, Cassie faced him again.

"Of course! It changes everything. I… I'll have to rethink a lot of

things. The human enclaves in the Dream Realm are hardly self-sufficient, after all. It is difficult enough to provide food and shelter for three hundred million people. To accommodate billions… even if it happens gradually over the span of a decade, a lot of development plans will have to be accelerated.

Most communication still happens through the waking world. Data is stored digitally. The scope of it all is… is too much."

She let out a shaky breath.

"That is not even mentioning the fact that all the rules we know will become obsolete after our world is devoured by the Dream Realm. There will be no more Nightmare Gates, for example. No more division between the physical body and the spirit body… and so on. The Spell will have to change accordingly.

It might very well plunge us into a new horror, one that would make everything prior seem like a gentle prologue."

Cassie was thinking as the right hand of a person who was supposed to take the throne of humanity. There was a heavy responsibility that came with the throne, of course.

But to Sunny, her train of thought seemed a little funny. Because they had not even come close to vanquishing the Sovereigns yet.

He smiled.

"You seem to have a lot of plans for what happens after the fighting is over."

Cassie faced him with a hint of surprise on her exquisite face.

"I do. Don't you?"

Sunny chuckled.

"Of course… more fighting."

Their woes would not be over with the fall of Anvil and Ki Song. If anything, the true battle would only start after the war was over.

She remained silent for a while, then nodded somberly.

"You are right."

A few moments later, the young woman added quietly:

"But, regardless of it all. I… am glad. That you found a reason to come back."

Then, Cassie faced him with a brittle smile.

"It might feel like the world has rejected you… but, Sunny. It needs you, as well."

Saying these words, she turned away.

"...As do I. And Nephis, most of all."

Sunny stared at her silently, a complicated mess of emotions rising in his heart. He wanted to say something, but didn't quite know what to say.

In the end, he simply shrugged.

"That is alright. Because I need the world, too. And Nephis. And you as well, Cassie."

She smiled.

"I'll remember."

With that, she stood up and sighed.

"Our time is up. If I linger any longer, some people in Bastion might grow suspicious of the purpose of my visit."

Sunny nodded lightly and rose from his chair.

He had brought Cassie here from NQSC. So, he had to bring her back, as well.

Soon, the two of them appeared in a deserted alley in the depths of the outskirts. Cassie could use her own tether to return to Bastion

immediately, but hesitated for a while.

Eventually, she said with uncertainty:

"I'm… I won't say anything about what is happening between Nephis and you in Bastion."

Sunny suppressed an embarrassed cough, feeling grateful for her decision to refrain from discussing that matter. The situation… was strange and complicated enough, already.

Cassie took a deep breath.

"I want you to know something, though."

He raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

She lowered her head.

"About how it feels, on the other side. You see… I can't quite imagine how you feel, being forgotten by everyone. But I do know how it feels to have forgotten. It is a strange thing. When we first met, I didn't know who you were — by all accounts, you were a stranger. And yet, there was this strange sense of familiarity.

As if we've known each other all our lives."

Cassie took a deep breath.

"There were… other feelings, as well. Subtle and faint, but undeniable. I won't describe them. But I am sure that Nephis is being swayed by these unconscious thoughts, as well. Even if she can't retain the memories of you, the emotions those memories stir remain. So… she wasn't just captivated by Master Sunless because he is charming, handsome, and pleasant to be around."

Cassie faced Sunny once again.

"You might think that her feelings are not quite real, because her knowledge of you is not quite true… and maybe you are right. But I

still want you to respect them."

She remained silent for a moment, then nodded.

"...That is all I wanted to say. You can decide what to do yourself."

Before Sunny could say anything, she was gone.

He stared at the empty space where Cassie had stood expressionlessly.

After a while, he sighed.

'Did I just… get the "if you hurt her, I'll kill you" talk?'

The tone wasn't quite the same, but somehow, it did feel like that.

Chuckling, Sunny turned around and pulled on his tether.

'If I hurt Nephis, she'll kill me herself. Well… at least she'll try. I am a bit hard to kill these days…'

Chapter-1804: Unexpected Invitation

Today was a strangely slow day for the Brilliant Emporium.

Actually… it wasn't that strange.

Sunny had been complaining about how swamped he was in the kitchen when the business was good, but now that it was dull, he missed the money he could have made dearly.

The lack of clients was not strange, but the mood in Bastion was — which, in turn, was the reason why so few people were visiting.

It was an odd mixture of agitation and somber anticipation. People were incensed and indignant about the attempt on Neph's life, which was attributed to Clan Song more and more. But, at the same time, some of them were disturbed by the swiftly changing tone of public opinion.

After all, people weren't fools. Many could recognize the malignant roots of the spreading rumors. They might not know who was behind the propaganda, but they could at least sense that they were being lied to. Others had enough foresight to see where the volatile situation was headed, even if they did not know why.

All in all, there were as many dissenting voices as those wishing to hold the Queen of Worms responsible.

It was all happening a little too quickly.

Sunny was still reeling from the recent conversation with Cassie. Now that he knew how fast the war was approaching, his own mood had turned strange, as well.

Luckily, he did not have a lot of time to worry about such things.

He was terribly busy despite the lack of customers. Most of his time was dedicated to designing the weave of the soul sword. But he was also preoccupied with something else.

Because his date with Nephis was approaching much faster than the war!

'Damn it… what to do, what to do?'

The pressure of designing a perfect date was more daunting than his attempts to weave a soulbound weapon. He had acted confidently when asking her out, but now that he actually had to come up with something, Sunny felt like his mind was paralyzed.

'Why did I prepare a picnic for a fake date? I should have saved that idea for the real one!'

There were not a lot of romantic places in Bastion. Even worse, Sunny was not that knowledgeable about romance.

And worse still, Nephis was not exactly a typical young lady! Who knew what her idea of a romantic encounter was?

In short, Sunny was stumped.

…And Aiko wasn't helping.

"What's the problem, boss? Just take her to an inn. I mean, you are both adults. There are inns that charge by the hour, you know…"

He glared at her silently.

"You. You are the problem! Do you want to get me killed?!"

Aiko laughed.

"Alright, alright, I'm joking. Honestly, though, I say you are overthinking it. Anything and anywhere will be fine. After all, the only necessary ingredients are you and her. Since both of you will be present, that's most of the work done."

She glanced at him and asked:

"Just be yourself. Draw from your experience. What's the most romantic memory you have?"

Sunny scratched the tip of his nose.

"Uh… well… I spent a month being stuck on the corpse of a giant Nightmare Creature with a girl once…"

Aiko stared at him silently for a few moments.

"...On second thought, don't be yourself. Forget everything about your experience. Just take her on a boat ride, or something!"

Sunny eyes brightened.

"A boat ride? Huh. That's actually not a bad idea…"

He would have said more, but at that moment, his expression changed subtly.

Sunny looked at the door.

He could sense a group of people approaching the Brilliant Emporium. And they did not feel like his usual customers at all.

Heavy armor. Sharp weapons. Disciplined movements. Clear intent.

'Soldiers.'

Why would a cohort of Awakened warriors of Clan Valor be approaching his humble shop?

For a moment, Sunny thought about how he would kill them. Dealing with these Awakened would only take him a few moments. Then, he could dismiss the Mimic, grab Aiko, and step through the shadows to outside the city. After that, Valor would not be able to catch him unless Anvil took action personally.

If his cover was blown… that was the only way.

However, he quickly dismissed that idea.

First of all, even if his cover was somehow blown, they would most likely only learn that he was the Lord of Shadows. The Lord of Shadows was an ally of Clan Valor, so there was nothing to be afraid of.

Secondly, in the much worse scenario where the elders of Clan Valor had learned that he was plotting to murder the king with Nephis, there would not have been a mere cohort of Awakened approaching his shop.

So…

'Why the hell are they here, then?'

Sunny was very confused.

"What's the matter, boss?"

Aiko looked at him apprehensively.

He hesitated for a moment.

"I, uh… have no idea, really."

At that moment, the soldiers reached the Brilliant Emporium. Then, there was a loud knock on the door.

'Don't eat them.'

Giving Mimic a mental warning, Sunny sighed, put on a pleasant smile, and went to open the door.

"Welcome to the Brilliant Emporium! How may I help you?"

He was met with an unfriendly stare.

Six Awakened warriors were standing a few steps back, while one was looking at him with disdain. The man was tall and sharp, clad in an enchanted armor, with a vermilion cloak hanging from his broad shoulders.

He was also an Ascended.

"Master Sunless?"

Hearing the deep voice, Sunny smiled a little wider.

"That's what they call me, yes."

The Knight nodded.

"Please, come with me."

'Uh…'

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

"...Why?"

The man glanced at him with badly hidden irritation, and then said coldly:

"I was ordered to escort you to the Castle. Please follow."

'What the hell?'

Sunny hesitated for a bit, wondering if it wasn't too late to kill them and escape.

But he had to reluctantly abandon that idea.

"Why, by all means."

Exchanging a glance with Aiko, he shrugged helplessly and followed the Knight out of the Brilliant Emporium.

He tried to strike up a conversation a few times on the way to the Castle, but his escorts seemed to be in a foul mood. They were definitely not fans of Sunny, that was for sure.

With his sharp hearing, he could catch a few of them muttering under their breaths:

"Damned mongrel…"

No, really. What was going on? Was he going to get splashed in the

face with water and be given a tidy sum of soul shards to never see Nephis again? That was what usually happened in dramas...

Sunny had thought of a thousand possible reasons for this unexpected visit, each more ominous than the previous one. However, he failed to learn the truth until the very end.

The escorts brought him across the lake, and then to the very heart of the Castle.

When Sunny was led to the main keep, where the direct line of Clan Valor resided, he was on the verge of collapsing from fright.

Half an hour later, he somehow found himself in a grand hall, facing none other than… Morgan, the Princess of War.

Morgan was leaning on a stone throne, holding a sharp sword in her hand.

Her gaze was piercing.

Suddenly, Sunny felt a chill run down his spine.

'She doesn't know. Does she?'

The last time they met was during the assassination attempt. Of course, back then, Sunny was wearing the persona of the Lord of Shadows.

Morgan's cold gaze traveled across his figure, making him shiver.

Then, her scarlet lips parted:

"Oh."

Morgan's voice sounded calm.

"I understand now."

Sunny struggled to keep a deep scowl off his face.

'What… what does she understand?'

Smiling faintly, Morgan descended from the dais and approached him. The sharp blade of her sword glistened in the rays of sunlight.

"Master Sunless, I presume."

Sunny nodded and forced himself to speak:

"Princess Morgan. It's an honor."

She stared at him with a strange expression, then cleared her throat.

"Indeed. Please kneel."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Pardon?"

Her gaze turned a little dark.

"I told you to kneel."

He hesitated for a few moments, glanced at his escorts, and then elegantly lowered himself to one knee.

'Morgan has grown immensely strong after Transcending. Still… if she attacks, I should be able to dodge.'

She raised her sword slowly, and at the same time, he prepared to call upon the shadows.

However, to his shock…

The sword did not fall down to cut his neck.

Instead, Morgan touched the blade to his left shoulder lightly, then repeated the same process with his right shoulder and the crown of his head

Sunny was dumbstruck.

'What… is going… on?'

Having finished the strange action, Morgan dismissed her sword and

smiled in satisfaction.

"Master Sunless… I hereby proclaim you a Knight of Valor. Rise, Sir Sunless. May your edge never dull."

Sunny's eyes widened.

"P—pardon?!"

Chapter-1805: Sir Mongrel

Sunny was so stunned that he did not know what to say.

All he could think was…

'What the hell?!'

No, really…

Him? A Knight of Valor?!

His mind short-circuited for a moment.

Of all the things Sunny had expected when a cohort of unfriendly soldiers invited him to the Castle, that one never crossed his mind.

Still standing on one knee, he raised his head and looked at Morgan with a dumbfounded expression. She studied his face for a few moments, then clicked her tongue and turned away.

"That will be all. You can go now."

Remembering that he had been allowed to rise, Sunny slowly stood up.

"Princess Morgan. Please excuse my impudence, but if I may ask…"

Before he could ask anything, though, the guards unceremoniously grabbed him and escorted him out of the hall. A moment later, the door was slammed shut, hiding her bewitching figure from sight.

Just like that, his very short and very baffling audience with Morgan of Valor ended.

Sunny was left standing in the corridor, not sure what to do.

He blinked a couple of times.

'...Are they forcefully conscripting independent Masters?'

That was the only thing he could think of. But then, it didn't make any sense. If Clan Valor really wanted to conscript him into the army on the eve of war, they would have gone about it in a different manner. Forcing a Master with no loyalty to fight for them could do more harm than good.

Slowly, Sunny realized that a person who he had assumed was just passing by was actually standing still and staring at him. Composing himself a little, he looked up.

There was a dignified middle-aged man in a well-tailored livery standing in front of him. His grey hair was neatly combed, and his expression was perfectly stoic.

Noticing that Sunny was paying attention, the man nodded.

"Sir Sunless. I am Sebastian, the steward of the Great Clan Valor. Allow me to congratulate you on your knighthood."

Sunny took a deep breath.

'I'm not dreaming, am I?'

He exhaled slowly.

There was actually a steward named Sebastian in Bastion! That... that was just a little bit too much, wasn't it ?!

Worst of all, Sunny couldn't even sense the man's Rank. He could have been a mundane person or a Saint.

Sunny forced out a polite smile and said:

"Nice to meet you. Ah… please forgive my lack of manners. I have to admit, I am extremely vexed right now. Can... can you explain what is going on?"

The middle-aged steward nodded.

"Certainly, sir. You've just been granted the title of a Knight of Valor. Oh… additionally, you have also been appointed as the Knight Commander of the Ardent Wardens. What an honor."

Sunny closed his eyes for a moment.

"...Ardent Wardens? Who are these Ardent Wardens?"

The steward gave him a dignified smile.

"Ardent Wardens are a grassroots volunteer organization that holds various activities to enrich the daily lives of the elderly citizens of Bastion. Food drives, cultural events, interest clubs… and the like. Self-governed."

Sunny stared at him silently, struggling to maintain a calm expression.

"So, if these Ardent Wardens are self-governed… then why do they need a Knight Commander? No, wait. Why does a volunteer organization dealing with bored elderly people need one?"

The middle-aged man nodded seriously.

"Exactly!"

There was not a hint of sarcasm in his esteemed voice, but somehow, Sunny got the impression that he was being mocked.

He was very confused.

"...So what are my responsibilities as a Knight Commander, exactly?"

The steward lingered for a moment, then said in a solemn tone:

"There are none, Sir Sunless. Well… I should rather say that there is only one. It is to uphold the dignity of the Great Clan Valor. Don't do anything that would besmirch the prestige of the royal family, and you should be good."

He paused, and then added neutrally:

"Of course, you will receive a monthly stipend, as well as other benefits befitting a man of your station."

Sunny stared at him some more.

'Crazy! I'm going crazy!'

"So… let me get this straight. I was made a Knight, but I don't have to perform the duties of a knight. There is nothing I am responsible for, but I am going to be paid for doing nothing?"

Sebastian smiled.

"Your wisdom is unmatched, Sir Sunless. You put it all so eloquently."

With that, he walked away at a brisk pace and beckoned for Sunny to follow.

"Now, please come with me!"

Sunny suppressed a frustrated groan and hurried after the steward.

"Coming, coming... but, where are we going?"

The middle-aged man answered in a refined manner:

"As a Knight Commander, you are to receive a list of items. Two sets of full dress attire, two finely dyed tabards, a parade cloak with an embroidered crest, an unadorned winter cloak, an embroidered battle banner, a painted household banner, a leather waist belt with an engraved silver buckle…"

Sunny silently covered his face with a palm.

***

Some time later, he was standing alone in one of the courtyards of the Castle, holding a sizable pack. His expression was absent.

The steward had basically chased him away from the keep after assembling the list of items that a Knight was eligible to receive. The man had refused to answer Sunny's tentative question until the very

end, finding inventive ways to tactfully dodge them every time.

It was just that… how could Sunny put it?

Steward Sebastian did not seem to have kept the truth from him on purpose. Rather, it looked like the dignified man was too embarrassed to answer directly, as if saying it aloud would be a disgrace.

Sunny stared into the distance silently.

'...I guess I am a Knight of Valor now.'

Weirder things had happened.

Granted… just a few.

In any case, at least the whole thing was such a formality that he had not even been forced to give an oath of allegiance. Neither had he been issued any Memories — with the war approaching, Clan Valor did not seem keen to waste resources on a fake Knight. That was a good thing for Sunny, because he did not want to receive a sword forged by Anvil.

Nor was he capable of receiving one — there was no Spell to facilitate the transfer of Memories between him and its carriers, after all.

He would also be receiving a monthly stipend of soul shards.

Sunny sighed.

'Wow. Nepotism is truly the best.'

By now, he had figured out that his sudden knighthood had something to do with his connection to Nephis. It was just that the initiative must have come from some other entity in the Great Clan, which was why the signals had crossed.

So, there was nothing left to do except return home.

Sunny was ready to take a step forward, but then froze for a moment.

He was currently in a courtyard… a different one from where he had duelled young Master Tristan, but the mood was quite similar.

There were more than a few unfriendly gazes aimed his way. Looking around, he saw various Knights and Squires, all staring at him with cold expressions.

Sunny gulped.

They had already hated him before for having the audacity to accompany their princess. Now that Morgan had knighted him for no good reason…

It did not look good! Even Sunny was starting to hate himself a little.

Who wouldn't hate a handsome freeloader?

'Gods… I won't have to fight another duel, will I?'

As a matter of fact, he had the feeling that, this time, there would be no duel.

Instead, there would be a thorough beating.

Or an attempt of one, at least!

Sunny looked around once more, noticing that several Knights were already approaching him slowly with dark faces.

'Right. I just need to defuse the situation. Be polite and keep calm. Be polite…'

One of the Knights snarled through gritted teeth:

"I didn't believe it… hey, you! Mongrel! Have you no…"

Sunny's eye twitched, and he opened his mouth to retort.

Before he could, however, there was a rustle of wings, and suddenly, a breathtaking figure was standing between him and the incensed Knights.

Shielding him with her radiant wings, Nephis frowned and looked at

them scornfully.

"...What is going on here?"

Chapter-1806: Shadow in Distress

Seeing that a literal Saint had fallen from the sky, the approaching Knights froze and looked away in embarrassment — or rather, they tried.

However, they were too mesmerized by Neph's appearance. With her beautiful white wings, tousled silver hair, and flawless figure, she looked nothing short of stunning. It was as if a celestial deity had suddenly descended into the mortal world, illuminating it with her pure light.

Additionally, she wasn't wearing her usual elegant attire or polished armor. Instead, she was dressed in simple clothes made out of soft white fabric, which seemed almost like loungewear, and contoured the graceful lines of her body well.

Too well, maybe…

Suddenly, Sunny felt an overwhelming impulse to walk in front of Nephis and shield her from their gazes, instead.

'What are you staring at, bastards?'

To be fair, there was nothing lascivious in their gazes. Instead, the Knights were strangely stuck between embarrassment, admiration, and a bit of remnant contempt directed at Sunny.

It was a funny sight.

"...What is going on here?"

Neph's voice was cold, and her expression was stern. White sparks danced in her piercing grey eyes.

The Knights shivered, instantly losing their rancor.

"N—nothing, Lady Nephis."

"We apologize for our rudeness."

"Please don't mind us…"

She scowled.

"If there is nothing going on, then I suggest you be on your way."

Her voice was even, but the seasoned Knights suddenly turned pale. A moment later, they were gone… it was quite amazing, actually. The skills of these warriors were truly formidable — if Sunny did not know any better, he would have thought that they were blown away by the wind!

'What a splendid movement technique…'

Knights of Valor were known for their indomitability in battle, but it seemed that they knew a thing or two about how to retreat, as well.

While he was considering admiring their swift withdrawal, Nephis huffed quietly and turned to him. Her scornful expression instantly disappeared, replaced by a subtle look of concern.

She lingered for a moment.

"I am sorry. Are you alright?"

Sunny couldn't help but gaze at her deeply, taking in every little detail of her.

Eventually, he remembered himself and answered in a slightly stifled tone:

"Ah… yes. I am fine."

Then, he tilted his head a little, glanced at the distant silhouette of the Ivory Island, and looked back at Nephis.

"I'm sorry, Lady Nephis… but did you just jump down after noticing

that I'm in trouble?"

He had not put two and two together immediately, but now that he took a better look at her, there were a few strange details. Her comfortable clothes, unkempt hair, and slight signs of agitation were far from the composed image Nephis usually presented to the public.

So, it wasn't hard to surmise that this appearance had not been planned.

Nephis froze for a moment, glanced down at herself, then awkwardly swiped a lock of her hair back, putting it behind her ear.

Sunny could have sworn that she blushed a little.

"Ah… well. I happened to be free when Cassie informed me that something was afoot. So… here I am."

She studied his face to make sure that everything was indeed alright, then looked at the pack in his hands in confusion.

"That said, what exactly happened? She only told me that you were taken to the main keep."

Her expression hardened.

"Did someone harass you? Was it my sister? What did she say?"

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, not knowing how to answer.

Eventually, he gave her a reassuring smile.

"Oh, no, nothing like that. Nobody harassed me. I was indeed summoned by Princess Morgan, but for a different reason. It's… well, I'm not sure how to say it…"

Neph's frown only deepened.

"A… different reason, you say? What reason might that be?"

Sunny coughed.

"Well, it's like this. She made me a Knight of Valor."

He did not know what Nephis had expected to hear, but it definitely wasn't this. For a moment, she seemed startled.

"What?"

He smiled helplessly.

"It's how I said. I was given the title of a Knight and the post of the Knight Commander of the Ardent Wardens. Oh… the Ardent Wardens are a group of volunteers who do community service, mainly taking care of the elderly. Yeah… I was told that my only responsibility is to maintain the prestige of the royal family… whatever that means…"

Nephis stared at him for a while, then sighed and covered her face with a hand. After a few moments of silence, she said in a flat tone:

"I am sorry. It's my fault… they were probably unhappy with me dating a man of no background. I expected opposition… but who would have thought that Morgan would be so accommodating?"

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

"Oh. So it's because of my lowly background. I see."

She lowered her hand and looked at him with a startled expression.

"No! I didn't mean it like that."

Sunny smiled.

"I know. You're not a conceited person. If anything… to be honest, between the two of us, I am probably more of a bigot. I actually have quite a prejudice against the Legacy clans. Although… it might be a bit bold of me, to admit something like that while attempting to court a princess of a Great Clan. Oh well, what can I do?

That just goes to show how the lack of pedigree results in a lack of common sense and decorum…"

Hearing his lighthearted tone, Nephis relaxed a little. She lingered a

little, then met his smile with a tentative one of her own.

"Then… I am grateful that you are willing to put your prejudice aside and give this princess a chance. You are an admirably broad-minded person, Master Sunless."

He laughed.

"No one has ever accused me of being broad-minded before. It's just that I would have to be mad to let my pettiness stand in the way of seeing you, Lady Nephis."

Then, he suddenly froze.

'Right.'

Weren't they supposed to go on a date in a few days?

Meeting her today, therefore, was a bit awkward. What was he supposed to do? Pretend that they had not made plans? Or try to woo her right now?

Noticing his puzzlement, Nephis asked:

"What's wrong?"

Sunny hesitated for a few moments.

"No, it's nothing. It's just that… to be honest, I've been thinking about our date a lot. Constantly, even. I've been looking forward to it so much that meeting you all of a sudden is a bit of a shock. Well… I know that you are terribly busy, Lady Nephis. So, I'll see you in a few days?"

She looked at him silently for a while.

Then, she smiled subtly.

"Actually, I'm not that busy. How about we just make it today?"

Chapter-1807: Dream Come True

They parted soon after.

…For a little bit

Sunny might not have known a lot about women, but he knew enough not to try taking Nephis on a date immediately. Women had their mysterious rites and rituals, after all — if he invited her anywhere without giving her a chance to clean up and change out of her loungewear into something more flattering, he would have earned the scorn of the entire womankind.

Granted, those light clothes of hers were flattering enough, already. Although not exactly sparse, they did a splendid job of accentuating every…

'Pure thoughts!'

In any case, the brief parting worked in his favor, as well. While Nephis returned to the Ivory Island to get ready, Sunny scrambled to arrange a few things. About an hour later, he was waiting by the riverside dock, holding the familiar picnic basket in one hand.

It was a blessing that there were two bodies at his disposal here in Bastion. Otherwise, he would have never managed to prepare in time. Not only did he have to make arrangements, but he also had to quickly assemble a delightful meal for a romantic getaway. One body had been running around and outside the city, while the other had been busy in the kitchen.

Luckily, he managed to finish everything in the nick of time.

Suppressing a hint of nervousness, Sunny couldn't help but look up at

the graceful silhouette of the Ivory Tower hovering among the clouds. He almost expected to see a beautiful figure descending from the sky in a mantle of sunlight… but due to the location of where they had arranged to meet, Nephis decided to be less conspicuous.

If Changing Star had indeed landed on a lively street in all her radiant glory, the commotion caused by her arrival would not have been small. Therefore, she simply walked up to him like a normal person, appearing from an alley.

Of course, there was still a big reaction. A Saint was not someone who could be ignored… and Nephis was not just any Saint. Wearing a simple white summer dress and no jewelry, she was still stunning. The passerby couldn't help but react to her beauty, and a lot of heads had been involuntarily turned.

Sunny felt his heart skip, knowing that today, that beauty was just for him.

As she approached with a light smile, he heard a quiet and melodious ringing. He had not told her a lot about the destination of their date, but he did tell her that it would have something to do with water — so, Nephis summoned the familiar pair of silver anklets, which were a Memory she had used on the Great River to help her move in the water.

Sunny couldn't help but smile when looking at her.

Nephis walked over, stopped near him, and asked in a light tone:

"So, Master Sunless… where are you taking me?"

He hesitated for a moment.

Out there in the waking world, it was winter, and bitter cold haunted the snowy streets. But here in Bastion, it was still summer. The entire city was bathed in smoldering heat.

People were seeking shelter from the incandescent sun in the shade and longing for cool drinks. Of course, as Saints, both Sunny and Nephis could ignore the sultry weather… but that did not mean that they would not enjoy the refreshing feeling of cooling down their

bodies.

He smiled.

"To a beach."

Nephis tilted her head a little.

"...A beach?"

Sunny nodded.

"It might sound a little silly… but actually, I've always dreamed of going to the beach. It's just that there were none where I grew up… actually, I'm not entirely sure if there are any left in the waking world."

He paused for a moment, and then added with a smile:

"But I've learned that there is actually one not far from Bastion. So… would you mind making a dream of mine come true, Lady Nephis?"

She looked at him with a hint of mirth.

"How would I dare refuse? I remember you telling me that you'd given up on having dreams. Fortunately, you seem to have found one, so I'd be delighted to help you fulfill it."

The corner of Neph's mouth twisted upward, and she added with a hint of teasing in her tone:

"However… are you sure that you don't just want to see me in a bathing suit, Master Sunless?"

He looked at her seriously.

"I promise that I don't just want to see you in a bathing suit."

His tone was earnest… but there was a subtle accent on the word "just".

She laughed.

"If you say so. Then… how do we get to this beach?"

Sunny offered her his arm.

"Follow me."

Once she wrapped her arm around his, he guided her to the dock.

There were several rivers feeding the Mirror Lake, and one it gave birth to. That river was much more modest than the great River of Tears that flowed through the entire Song Domain, but it was still deep and full. Its destination was also the same — it flowed south, toward the Stormsea.

Bastion was much further south and closer to the Stormsea than Ravenheart, so the river wasn't very long. It could be quite dangerous for the same reason — powerful sea monsters sometimes entered the estuary and swam far upstream, attracted by the smell of human souls.

They never reached the Mirror Lake, though, because the Citadel of Clan Dagonet stood between Bastion and the sea. The powerful abominations from the depths always died trying to breach the river fortress.

Nevertheless, the length of the river between Bastion and the stronghold was not entirely safe. But Sunny judged that nothing in this tamed region of the Dream Realm could seriously threaten him and Nephis. Very few things out there could.

What he cared about was that there was a wild beach not too far down the river. It was beautiful, peaceful, and remote… a perfect place for a date on a hot summer day.

That was where he wanted to take Neph.

There were several wooden longships tied to the pier, their bows carved to resemble dragons and serpents. These drakkars belong to Clan Dagonet, and were used to patrol the river and guard the trade ships coming from the Stormsea. There were also several barges meant to deliver supplies to the river fortress and the town that had grown around it.

Most importantly, there were plenty of small river boats.

'Thanks, Aiko…'

Sunny guided Nephis to one of the boats, which he had rented from the owner in advance. It was just large enough to fit two people and a bit of cargo, with a single pair of oars at the stern.

She looked at it curiously.

"Are we sailing down the river?"

Sunny hesitated for a moment, then smiled helplessly.

"Well… more like rowing down the river? Oh, I'll be the one handling the oars, of course. Why, you don't like it?"

'Should I kill Aiko? A little.'

Nephis looked at the boat, then at the river, and finally back at him.

Eventually, she smiled.

"No. I love it."

Sunny let out a relieved sigh.

'Aiko can live. Should I give her a raise?'

Chapter-1808: Down the River

Sunny held Neph's hand to help her step into the boat, then untied it, pushed it away from the berth, and jumped inside nimbly. His movements were so light that the boat did not rock at all.

Nephis sat down on the bench at the front, while he took his place on the bench at the stern. They were facing each other, with only the picnic basket between them.

He took the oars and moved them gently, guiding the boat to the middle of the river. It floated smoothly, cutting the water with a pleasant sound. The lively streets of Bastion crawled past them, with plenty of interesting scenes to be seen. The further from the shore they moved, the quieter it became, until the bustle of the city had turned into a quiet hum.

Sunny was not looking around, though. He was looking at Nephis, and in turn, she was looking at him.

Both were smiling.

Nephis leaned to the side and lowered a hand into the water. Watching her fingers cut its surface, she sighed deeply, and then closed her eyes for a moment. Her features relaxed.

"How peaceful."

Hearing her say that made him happy.

Sunny extended his shadow sense in all directions, so he knew that there were no Nightmare Creatures hiding under the water. He did not spoil the mood by telling her to be careful. Instead, he used the few moments she had her eyes closed to stare at her with an unabashed craving.

Then, he averted his eyes and concentrated on rowing.

After a while, Nephis looked at him with a subtle smile. The city was behind them by then — there were no other boats on the river, and no ships in sight. The only sounds breaking the silence were the rustle of water and the soft splashes produced by the oars.

She leaned back a little and asked in a leisurely tone:

"Won't you grow tired from rowing?"

Sunny chuckled. It was obviously a question asked for the sake of being polite. He was supposed to be a Master, after all — guiding a small boat downriver would not tire him. He could have used a measure of strength suitable for an Ascended and sent the boat flying at great speed to strain himself, but then the oars would probably explode into splinters.

That wouldn't be nice at all.

"Oh. I might not look it, but actually, I'm quite strong."

He let go of one of the oars for a moment and showed her his hand.

"These hands of mine can crush mountains."

Nephis laughed.

"I'm sure. Still, I feel guilty watching you do all the work."

Sunny remained silent for a moment. Then, his smile turned a little daring.

"Why don't you come here and help me, then?"

She looked at him, then rose with a smile and moved to the rear bench. Sunny shifted to the side to give her some room. A few moments later, they were sitting side by side, each holding one oar.

The bench wasn't quite wide enough to fit two people, so their bodies were pressed tightly against each other.

The cool breeze was caressing them gently, and the sun reflected beautifully from the surface of the water. The river was peaceful and quiet. Sunny could feel the heat of her body through his clothes, and she could undoubtedly feel his.

He inhaled deeply.

Rowing a boat in this manner was a little tricky. The oars had to move both simultaneously and with equal amounts of force — otherwise, the small vessel would either turn to the shore or start spinning in place.

But Sunny and Nephis easily fell into a comfortable rhythm. They were perfectly in sync — the oars rose and fell in tandem with each other, and the boat remained perfectly straight.

It was rocking a little, though, and due to the fact that they were so close, each holding an oar with one hand, maintaining balance was a little tedious.

Sunny moved his free arm and wrapped it around Neph's waist, firmly holding her in place. She glanced at him with a smile, then did the same.

Just like that, they remained silent for a while, rowing in harmony while enjoying the breeze, the peaceful quiet of the river, and each other's warmth.

The silence between them wasn't awkward or tense. Instead, it was comfortable and soothing, easing their tired minds.

After a while, Nephis looked at him and asked:

"What are you thinking about?"

Sunny lingered for a moment, then shrugged slightly.

"Just… life, I guess. How it is sometimes full of sorrow, and sometimes full of joy."

She studied his face carefully, then turned to enjoy the view of the river.

"Interesting... my life is quite different, I think. I am content at times, and at other times I am resentful. But I don't really feel joy or sorrow that much. Mostly, I am just… focused. Actually, I feel a little guilty if I am too happy or too sad.

It makes me feel that I have allowed myself to become distracted."

He looked at her curiously.

That was how Nephis was. She lived in service of her goal... which didn't mean that she was miserable. It just meant that her mind was preoccupied with practical matters, and she mostly drew both satisfaction and discontent from the actions undertaken to realize her aspiration.

That was a valid way to live a life. Still... Sunny felt that she was being too harsh on herself.

He hesitated for a moment.

"Really? Then, when was the last time you felt joy? And when was the last time you felt sorrow?"

Nephis looked at the river with a faint smile. She remained silent for a bit, then answered in an easy tone:

"I don't quite remember."

Sunny kept looking at her, not saying anything.

Was it because it was not important to her, so she had forgotten?

Or was it because her joys and sorrows had all been connected to him?

He hugged her tighter.

Sensing it, she turned to face him and smiled.

"What about you?"

Sunny blinked a couple of times and answered honestly:

"Why, I am full of joy right now."

Hearing Neph laugh, he smiled brightly.

"As for sorrow… I had to throw out a batch of strawberries because there were too few customers in the café as of late. That was really sad."

Her laugh grew a little louder.

That made him happy, as well.

After a while, Nephis looked at him, lingered for a few moments, and then said neutrally:

"This… was a really great idea. I have a bit of history with boats, you know."

Sunny knew, of course. From the boat she had built from the bones of a demon to cross the Dark Sea to Ananke's ketch, the two of them had shared many poignant moments while rocking on the water.

Nephis sighed.

"I once sailed down a great river with a dear person. That person is gone, but the fondness remains."

He couldn't do anything but hold her close.

Sunny knew that she was talking about Ananke. But even though she could not remember him, these words described the two of them, too.

Looking ahead, he smiled and said:

"Then, it's good to forge new memories. To remember them fondly as well, one day in the future."

Eventually, the beach he had wanted to take her to appeared in sight.

By then, basked in her warmth, Sunny felt a bit regretful that it did.

Chapter-1809: Beach Date

Bastion used to be surrounded by a vast, lush forest. Sadly, the entire forest had been one giant, dreadful abomination — a Fallen Titan that possessed immense power and almost inexhaustible vitality.

The Knights of Valor had risen to become one of the deadliest forces among the early carriers of the Nightmare Spell precisely because the warriors of the future Great Clan had spent decades fighting against the titanic forest and its horrid spawns. There were no Masters and no Saints back then — and yet, they managed to push it back from the shores of the Mirror Lake.

Nevertheless, Bastion had still been besieged by the hungry woods from all sides, and it was only after the Second Generation of Awakened came of age that the situation changed. One of the sons of the famed founder of Clan Valor took command of the Knights and waged a ruthless war against the vast Titan.

Today, everyone knew the name of that son, for he had become the King of Swords. As for the abominable forest, it was long gone — burned to the ground, the ashes scattered by the winds.

A bustling city and fertile fields now stretched where impenetrable woods once stood, blocking the light of the sun and drowning the land in darkness. Sunny and Nephis had travelled far enough downstream to leave the settled parts behind, though.

Now, tall trees crowded the shore — these ones quite docile and not dangerous at all… unless one went digging for their roots or tried to cut them down, at least. There was a river bend not too far away, and the trees retreated a little along its curve, forming a sequestered beach.

Emerald leaves were rustling like a vast sea, and sunlight poured from the pure azure sky. The air was shimmering from the sweltering

heat. Further away from shore, the ground was covered by moss and swaying grass, but there was a wide strip of golden sand near the water.

It was beautiful and peaceful, like a picture out of a book.

Sunny smiled when he saw the picturesque view.

"We're here."

The two of them carefully guided the boat to the shore. Nephis jumped down onto the sand, looked around, and inhaled deeply. She seemed at ease and relaxed, which was a rare sight. Sunny, at least, did not remember when was the last time he had seen her in such a serene mood.

Perhaps it was never.

Picking up the picnic basket, he jumped to the beach, then grabbed the bow of the boat with his free hand and pulled it ashore as if it did not weigh anything. Then, he studied their surroundings with a curious expression.

'...How nice.'

Suffice it to say, Sunny wasn't a big fan of getting wet — simply because the Spell had never missed a chance to drop him into some damnable body of water. Nevertheless, now that he was on an actual beach, the idea of spending a pleasant day playing in the water and basking in the sun did not seem terrible at all.

Especially in the present company.

Nephis glanced at him curiously.

"Well, what do you think? Is it everything you dreamed of?"

Sunny chuckled.

"Ah… it's not bad, I guess. We'll see how things go."

This outing of theirs was entirely spontaneous, and they had spent

quite a while getting here. Needless to say, Sunny had not had a chance to eat before due to being summoned to the Castle and running around to prepare the date — so, he had worked up an appetite.

Nephis was most likely the same.

He found a good spot near the water and placed the basket down. Opening it, Sunny produced a beautifully embroidered blanket, laid it on the sand, and then moved the basket to its middle.

Looking at Neph, he asked:

"Would you like to eat something, Lady Nephis?"

She studied him for a few moments, then shook her head with a smile.

"Actually, I think I want to cool down a little first."

He nodded.

"Oh."

Then, his expression changed a little.

'Oh!'

Before Sunny could react, Nephis took a step back and pulled her dress off. She was wearing a white swimming suit beneath — it was not too modest and not too revealing, hiding everything that needed to be hidden just well enough to set his imagination ablaze.

He barely managed not to gulp.

Her alabaster skin, her glistening silver hair, her striking eyes, the smooth lines of her supple body… it was a lot to take in.

Her figure was slender and athletic, with a flat stomach and perfectly defined muscles… as expected from a person who spent most of her time either in battle or practicing the sword. However, it wasn't harsh and cumbersome. Instead, it was beautiful and soft in all the right…

'I should probably… look away.'

Sunny struggled to maintain his mental composure, knowing that she could sense the intensity of his longing.

…His struggles had limited success.

Nephis chuckled, then turned around and stepped into the water. Then, she looked at him over the shoulder.

"Are you coming?"

Sunny hesitated for a few moments.

He wanted to. And he was going to, eventually… but doing so meant that there was no way back. Because he would have to dismiss the Nebulous Mantle to take a dive into the cool water.

The Mantle protected him from prying eyes and suppressed his presence. Once his presence was released, Nephis would get a better measure of his power. She might not realize that he was a Saint immediately — some Masters had one too, after all. Sunny himself had emanated a subtle presence as an Ascended, for example.

Plus, five of his shadows were far away, which diminished the ferocity of his presence a lot.

But, still… Nephis would be able to realize the truth eventually.

He wasn't quite ready to let that happen, yet.

Sunny smiled easily.

"Go ahead first. I'll prepare things here and join you soon."

She studied his face for a moment, then smiled and turned away.

"Suit yourself!"

Not wasting any time, Nephis dove into the cool water, escaping the summer heat with a splash. She moved away from shore with powerful strokes, then turned onto her back and continued swimming

while looking at the vivid blue sky.

Her tranquil gaze was full of joy.

Chapter-1810: Beautiful Gift

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then looked down and concentrated on setting the table.

However, he couldn't help but throw glances at Nephis, who was enjoying herself in the water. His gaze was a little heated, but he tried to control his emotions as best he could, knowing that she might sense the nature and intensity of his desire.

He was sure that she already had.

Maybe Nephis did not mind, though.

Sunny let out a quiet sigh.

His shadow sense had expanded to envelop a vast area, reaching far and wide. From the sky to the bottom of the river, nothing could escape him. He knew that Neph could handle any danger hiding underwater, but he still felt protective. Today was her day off, which was an exceedingly rare event. So, nothing was allowed to spoil it.

Many kilometers away, a hideous monster was stealthily moving through the woods. Before it could take another step, though, shadows suddenly came alive all around it. The beast did not have any time to react or to let out a roar — it was swiftly pulled into the darkness and disappeared from sight. A few moments later, a stream of blood flowed out of the shadows.

Sunny shook his head with reproach and continued pulling out snacks out of the picnic basket. There were all kinds of dishes for Nephis to choose from — those she liked the most at the Brilliant Emporium. There was also a small brazier and a kettle to brew tea.

He had prepared well.

Eventually, Nephis had enough fun and swam back to the shore. Sunny was standing there peacefully, enjoying the breeze. Rising from the water, she swept her hair back and looked at him with an easy smile.

"Aren't you hot, Master Sunless? All alone there on the shore."

He hesitated for a moment.

"Not really. I've prepared the food. Would you like…"

Instead of answering, she looked at him for a moment, then moved her hand unhurriedly.

In the next moment, Sunny was splashed with water.

He froze.

'Uh… what just happened?'

His brain refused to process the information.

Noticing his startled expression, Nephis couldn't help but laugh. Her melodious laughter, so rare and beautiful, was carried away by the wind, and then she looked at him with a hint of a mischievous smile.

Her tone was subtly teasing.

"...I feel a little cheated."

Sunny stared at her silently for a few moments, then sighed deeply and lowered his head.

Then, the Nebulous Mantle dissolved into shadows.

Immediately, the summer day seemed a little colder. The shadows hiding under the trees had grown deeper and darker. Their darkness, in turn, made sunlight more stark.

Not wasting any time, Sunny pulled off his clothes. He was wearing a pair of simple black swimming trunks underneath his trousers… finding them had given him a lot of trouble, actually, while he was

preparing for the date.

Everything else was fine, but something like that would usually be imported from the waking world. Obviously, Sunny had to run around the city a little to procure a suitable pair.

The breeze caressed his naked skin, and at the same time, Nephis looked at him with a strange intensity in her calm grey eyes.

Sunny's body was not at all like what one would expect from a gallant and scholarly enchanter. It was lithe, with not a gram of fat covering the lean muscles. His figure looked like something chiseled from marble by an enamored sculptor.

His flawless porcelain skin made his raven-black hair and dark eyes seem even darker.

Most striking of all, though… was an intricate tattoo of a great serpent that coiled around his arms and torso. Contrasted against the fair skin, the black ink was like pure darkness.

Every onyx scale of the coiling serpent was so vividly tattooed that it almost seemed alive.

Sunny had summoned the Serpent from Godgrave for a special purpose. He had not planned on revealing it in such a manner, though...

Well, all his plans had gone astray ever since this morning.

Nephis seemed a little startled by the sight.

"You… you have a tattoo."

Sunny looked at his arms, then smiled pleasantly.

"That I do."

While she was gazing at him deeply, he sent a little essence into his muscles and jumped high into the air… then plummeted into the water like a cannonball, making sure that Nephis was in the splash zone.

"You…"

In the next moment, she was doused with water from head to toe.

Neph's eyes widened a little.

Laughing, Sunny surfaced and then swam away from the shore.

"You, get back here!"

The water was cool and clear, washing away the summer heat from his body.

'Coming to a beach… was indeed a really great idea…'

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The two of them played in the water for a while. With her silver anklets, Nephis was like a mermaid… Sunny spent most of the time enjoying the sight of her moving gracefully underwater, so much so that he was starting to worry that he would be too distracted and accidentally drown.

The water was pleasantly cool and incredibly clear. The sun, which had been high above them on the way to the beach, was slowly rolling down the horizon.

At some point, Sunny left Nephis alone and swam far away from the shore, then held his breath and dove down.

Reaching the depths of the river, he noticed what he was looking for — a stealthy Nightmare Creature that looked like a massive boulder. Once he swam close to it, though, the boulder split apart, revealing a jagged line. The abomination was like a monstrous abalone, and what had seemed like stone was its shell.

Before the creature could swallow him, Sunny crushed the impregnable shell with his fist, and then spent some time thoroughly tearing the river beast apart. Eventually, he fished the soul shard out of its remains and pushed himself toward the surface.

Soon, thoroughly hungry, Sunny and Nephis returned to shore.

Pleasantly tired, they walked over to the picnic blanket and sat down. She looked at the food with glistening eyes.

Before Nephis could eat anything, however, Sunny reached outward and opened his palm.

The soul shard was laying on it. It was a bit different from how the usual rough crystals — this one was perfectly round and polished, glimmering with a beautiful nacre color.

Nephis looked at it with curiosity.

"What is this?"

Sunny smiled.

"Just... something beautiful. For you."

She hesitated for a moment, then took it and studied the glimmering pearl for a few moments.

Then, her face bloomed with a bright smile.

Bringing the pearl closer to her face, Nephis looked at Sunny with appreciation.

Then, she sighed.

"I don't have a gift for you, though."

Pushing a plate of sandwiches closer to her, Sunny laughed.

"You are here. That's the best gift."

Chapter-1811: Perfect Day

"You are here. That's the best gift."

Neph's smile grew a little wider.

'...Such a smooth talker.'

Still, coming from Master Sunless, even the most trite compliment was too pleasant to hear.

She looked down at the luminous pearl he had given her. It was merely an Awakened soul shard, but… the lustrous pearl was so pretty, glowing softly with an opalescent shine in her hand. Its beauty and uniqueness made it seem quite valuable.

However, it was the intent behind the gift and the words that accompanied it that made Nephis like it a lot.

She looked at him with a light smile.

"I'll cherish it."

Master Sunless usually wore his hair tied back neatly, but now it was loose and wet, falling to his shoulders like a waterfall of black silk. His skin was like white porcelain, with the onyx scales of the coiling serpent contrasted starkly against its smooth surface. His dark eyes were glistening in the sunlight.

He looked lovely.

Nephis stole a furtive glance at his chiselled body, then hid her agitation by biting into a flavourful sandwich. Her eyes closed slightly.

'Ah…'

The sandwich was absolutely delicious. It was simply unfair… her sight was already being assaulted by his figure, and now, her taste was besieged by his incredible cooking.

Which of her five senses would Master Sunless tackle next?

Thinking that, Nephis tried not to blush.

She had been a little flustered when he took off his clothes to jump into the water. He was much… sharper than she had imagined. Nephis was used to being in the company of warriors, so she had seen her fair share of athletic bodies. But the contrast between his gentle demeanor and his lean, sculpted physique was too striking.

Not to mention the detailed tattoo of the coiling serpent. It was so out of place on the body of the refined enchanter that Nephis had been given a pause. That tantalizing tattoo… seemed like it had a history.

Had Master Sunless been a delinquent once?

For some reason, the thought was strangely exciting.

Of course, she had a different suspicion about the origin of the serpent tattoo.

Then, there was the unexpected potency of his presence. She had known for a while that Master Sunless was in a habit of wearing a Memory that dampened the impression people had of him. But she had not expected that he would be that impressive.

His presence was subtle, but undeniable… very fitting for a man whose affinity lay with shadows.

However, although she had paid attention to his appealing body and the unanticipated power of his dark presence, Nephis had been distracted by something else.

When Master Sunless dismissed his mantle, there was another thing that was revealed. She had always felt that his longing was strangely muffled — it was there, but somewhat obscured from her senses. But when the black mantle came off, the burning heat of his desire was

finally revealed to her in all its startling depth.

It seemed that behind the humble, slightly melancholic exterior…. Master Sunless was a man of great passion.

That was why Nephis had been flustered.

She had known that he felt a strong attraction to her, both on an emotional and physical level. However, it was quite a surprise to feel how deep that attraction went.

…It was not an unpleasant surprise, though.

Because Nephis felt a strong attraction, too — otherwise, she wouldn't have agreed to see him in earnest. So, instead of being uncomfortable, she secretly felt pleased and flattered by his attention.

Nephis had been grateful for the cold water at that time.

It was all strange, and not entirely like herself. She had never felt that way… at least not that she could remember. But being with Master Sunless spoke to something deep within her. He made her feel at ease, as if the two of them belonged together like two pieces of the same puzzle.

He was just so… pleasant to be around. She couldn't help herself.

But that was fine.

Nephis let go of these thoughts as she enjoyed the picnic prepared by Master Sunless. Everything was delicious. The tea was fragrant. The company was the best part.

The glistening water, the rustling leaves, the embroidered blanket, the man sitting near her… it was all perfect, like the picture out of a book.

She had not felt that relaxed in a long, long time.

A disastrous war that would decide not only her own fate, but the fates of countless humans as well, was almost upon them. And yet, here she was, enjoying an idle day at a beach with a beautiful man.

Nephis would have felt guilty about neglecting her responsibilities, but she knew that coming here today was also important.

She was proficient with a sword and had spent countless hours practicing how to wield it. Therefore, she knew that pushing her body without reprieve only seemed appealing, but would never produce a good result. The body needed sufficient rest in order to grow stronger and absorb what it had learned — otherwise, it would simply collapse, destroying all the progress.

It was the same with the mind. Nephis had a thousand issues to think about and a thousand strategies to plan. But it would not be good to drive herself into delirium by never allowing herself to relax — the mind needed rest, too. Persistent mental fatigue and sleep deprivation would only make it dull.

She knew all these things well.

But she had realized only recently that the heart was just like the body and the mind. Her spirit needed reprieve from time to time, as well. She couldn't just strain it endlessly and expect that nothing would break — instead, she needed to maintain it carefully, just like she maintained her body and mind.

So, this idle time with Master Sunless was not irresponsible at all. There was no need to feel guilty about satisfying her desires. That was just her doing some much-needed maintenance on her weary heart.

Today was perfect.

Finishing the sandwich, Nephis leaned forward to pour herself some light wine.

However, at that moment, Master Sunless reached forward, as well, aiming for the tea kettle.

Suddenly, their faces were terribly close.

Nephis looked at his lips, thinking…

'I wonder. How soft would they feel to the touch?'

Chapter-1812: Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood

Sunny was enjoying the sight of Nephis consuming the food he had prepared delightedly. He did not speak much and just looked at her, feeling that the day was perfect.

Everything went much better than he had anticipated. It was so blissful, in fact, that he unconsciously expected a Cursed Titan to fall on their heads out of nowhere.

Then, he had to remind himself that he wasn't Fated anymore.

'So… it will probably be fine.'

Still, his mouth was suddenly dry at the thought.

Not thinking much about anything, Sunny reached for the tea kettle.

But, at the same time, Nephis reached for the bottle of wine.

Suddenly, their faces were terribly close. It was to the point that he could feel her breath on his cheek.

The two of them remained motionless for a few moments, looking into each other's eyes.

Neph's gaze was calm, but also made him feel hot.

His own gaze… Sunny had no idea. He felt that it was rather intense.

Her tantalizing lips were so close.

She did not exactly move, but he sensed a subtle tension in her muscles, as if she was about to lean closer.

The leaves rustled softly all around them, and the setting sun painted by the sky in a million shades of golden radiance.

Sunny took a deep breath…

And said:

"I need to tell you something."

Just like that, the moment was gone.

He sighed.

"I said that there were secrets that I might never reveal. But… before anything else happens, there is one of them in particular I must share. So…"

Nephis remained motionless for a bit, then picked up the bottle of wine and leaned back. Pouring the greenish liquid into a glass, she exhaled slowly and took a sip.

Then, she smiled faintly.

"You don't really have to tell me. I already know."

Sunny froze.

His heart skipped a beat… no, a few beats.

Suddenly, he was a little panicked.

Hiding his frazzled state, he forced himself to breathe and asked slowly:

"Lady Nephis… what, exactly, do you think you know?"

He had been gathering courage to admit that he was the Lord of Shadows for so long. But… she already knew? How? Since when?

There were too many thoughts buzzing in his head.

Nephis drank more wine and smiled wistfully.

"Well, it wasn't that hard to figure out, was it?"

She paused for a few moments, then sighed.

"Plus, I feel like you've been giving me hints since we met today. I would be a fool not to realize."

Her tone wasn't particularly agitated… which was good.

However, at the same time, why wasn't it? How could she be so nonchalant?

Sunny had been agonizing about this issue for a long time, so he felt a little hurt by the fact that she could remain so calm about it.

He also didn't know how she could remain calm.

Nephis looked at him and continued:

"There are too few people with an affinity to shadows out there. But now, I am suddenly surrounded by them. Additionally… you could not have expected me to know, given how rare and arcane this knowledge is. But my experience in the Third Nightmare allowed me to draw a direct parallel between you and the Saint of Godgrave."

Sunny trembled.

"What knowledge?"

Her smile grew a little gentle.

"That mantle you wear looks just like the ritual attire of a priest of the Nightmare Spell. The mask the Lord of Shadows wears is part of that attire, as well. Now, it might be a coincidence for me to stumble on two people with high affinity to shadows, and it might be a coincidence for two Awakened to possess Memories inherited from the followers of Weaver.

But both of these connections can't be a coincidence."

He slowly poured the tea into his cup.

'...Huh.'

Indeed. Why had he not thought about that? Probably because the Nebulous Mantle was quite inconspicuous, unlike the eye-catching Weaver's Mask. He had not expected anyone to attribute it to the cult of Weaver... but this was Ananke's mantle, after all. Nephis knew it too well.

Additionally, she had never been supposed to meet the humble shopkeeper, to begin with… their unexpected relationship was the result of a messy series of unanticipated events. So, Sunny had not been as meticulous in maintaining his disguise as he would normally be.

'She… she knew all along?'

The idea was startling.

Nephis, meanwhile, finished her wine and poured herself a little more.

"...But mainly, it was the fact that the Lord of Shadows was too well-informed about everything that is happening in both worlds for someone who is supposed to be a recluse. Knowledge like that can't be achieved without an information network. So, I figured that he has many agents scattered across the waking world and the Dream Realm."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

'Huh?'

With a sigh, Nephis put her glass down and added in a soft tone:

"The lineage of Shadow God has never been discovered… at least everyone thinks so. But all these facts hint that it has. I don't know how the Shadow Clan managed to remain hidden for so long, and why you are starting to move now, but it doesn't matter. What matters…"

He tilted his head a little.

"Wait a moment…"

She looked him in the eyes and smiled.

"Is that I know that you are an agent of the Lord of Shadows, Master Sunless. But… that doesn't really change the way I think of you. So, you don't have to worry."

Sunny stared at her silently.

'...No, but why does she sound a little smug?'

And also, she did not care if he was a spy working for the Lord of Shadows… that made him feel warm inside.

It was so adorable!

He inhaled slowly, then said in a cautious tone:

"No, that's not it."

A hint of surprise appeared on Neph's face.

She lingered for a moment, then asked:

"It's not?"

Sunny scratched the back of his head awkwardly.

"What I mean to say is that I am not an agent of the Lord of Shadows."

His voice was a bit smooth.

"...I am the Lord of Shadows."

Nephis looked at him incredulously.

Her expression was deadpan.

"What?"

He nodded.

"Yes. The Lord of Shadows… that's me. We met in Godgrave before we met in Bastion."

Her face froze.

Nephis remained silent for a while, then asked in a flat tone:

"How would that even work? Godgrave is so far from Bastion, and your tether…"

Sunny sighed, then manifested the gloomy shadow into an avatar. A moment later, two of him were sitting on the blanket — one wearing nothing but the swimming trunks, the other wearing clothes made from manifested shadows.

"It's an Ability of mine. I have seven bodies. Two are here in Bastion, four are in Godgrave, and one is in the Song Domain."

Neph's eyes slowly widened.

She stared at the two of him without saying anything, her expression perfectly emotionless.

After a while, Sunny asked:

"Uh… Lady Nephis… are you fine?"

She nodded slowly.

"Yes. Of course."

He hesitated.

"Are you sure?"

Nephis raised an eyebrow elegantly.

"Yes. Why are you asking?"

Sunny coughed.

"Because… the river is on fire…"

Chapter-1813: Behind the Mask

The river was, indeed, on fire.

It was quite a strange sight. A vast expanse of clear water was boiling, and more than that, a sea of white flames was spreading across its surface like burning oil. A wave of heat assaulted Sunny like a tide, bathing him in warmth.

Neph slowly turned her head and looked at the river, a calm and composed expression on her face. The flames fell and were extinguished under her impassive gaze.

Then, she cleared her throat.

"Ah, yes. There… there was a Nightmare Creature preparing to surface. I burned it."

Her tone was poised and confident.

Sunny kept the smile off his face.

"Oh, I see. Of course. Thank you for reacting promptly."

His shadow sense was still enveloping the entire area, so he knew perfectly well that there had been no abomination. However, he wasn't going to mention it.

Instead, he raised the steaming cup of tea with a trembling hand, gulped it down, and sighed.

His avatar silently turned back into a shadow.

"Well… yes. As I was saying. There is no Shadow Clan and no information network. Instead, there is just me. My Transformation Ability allows me to manifest my shadows as incarnations of myself."

Nephis stared at him with wide eyes, still struggling to accept the revelation. Her voice turned a little subdued.

"Transformation Ability? So… you are a Saint? No, of course you are… because you are the... the Lord of Shadows..."

She closed her eyes for a moment.

"Then what about the other forms? The shadow colossus? The little crow? I was under the impression that the Lord of Shadows… that you… could assume these shapes due to your Transcendent Ability."

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"Those forms are made possible by a technique based on my Dormant, Awakened, and Ascended Abilities — as well as my Aspect Legacy."

Nephis took a deep breath, then looked at him sharply.

After a few moments of silence, she asked with a hint of agitation in her voice:

"You… you are really him? The Lord of Shadows?

Sunny remained motionless for a bit then extended an arm forward. Soul Serpent slithered under his skin, flowing into his palm — then, the intricate tattoo slowly disappeared, and the black odachi appeared in his hand.

He hesitated for a few moments, then gently placed the great sword on the sand.

"Yes. Although… it would be more appropriate to say that the Lord of Shadows is me."

Sunny looked at Nephis with a pale smile.

"I attained Transcendence four years ago, near the end of the Southern Campaign. After that… well, I was a little done with the world. So, I spent a few years wandering the Dream Realm aimlessly, having no desire to return. But eventually, I did. I sent most of my

incarnations to Godgrave, where they battled the Nightmare Creatures and established a foothold in that damned place.

And at the same time, I came to Bastion and opened my shop. That… is pretty much it."

She looked at him for a while without saying anything.

What was she thinking about?

Sunny was afraid to imagine.

Was she blaming him for fooling her? Feeling betrayed? Was she too stunned to understand the meaning of his words?

Or was she, perhaps, alright with it?

He did not know.

Nephis, meanwhile, reached for the wine silently.

…The bottle, not the glass.

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Nephis was reeling.

She couldn't help but look at Master Sunless… no, Saint Sunless… no, was that even his real name?

She couldn't help but look at the charming enchanter and mentally compare him to the sinister, cold, overbearing Lord of Shadows.

Sunless was slender, beautiful, and nice. His features were very handsome, but not in a rugged kind of way. Instead, he was gallant and charming in a soft and charming manner. His onyx eyes were usually calm, with a hint of wry humor hidden in their dark depths. Sometimes, they were clouded by a veil of strange melancholy, and sometimes, they were glistening with sincere mirth.

He made Nephis feel at ease.

The Lord of Shadows, meanwhile… was fearsome and imposing. His

face was always hidden behind a mask — sometimes, it was a featureless mask that made him look eerily unfathomable, and sometimes, it was the ferocious mask of a dark demon. His movements were sharp and powerful, full of ruthless intent. His sinister voice was cold and emotionless.

He made Nephis feel on edge.

If there was something in common between the two of them, it was that both of them seemed to be able to stir her emotions. But, still…

How could the two of them be the same person?

How could the gentle Master Sunless have cut down Great Nightmare Creatures without batting an eye?

How could the aloof Lord of the Shadows have worn a homely apron and caringly prepared delicious waffles for her, placing a scoop of ice cream and fresh strawberries on top?

She was failing to understand.

'Ah… my head hurts…'

Nephis asked a few questions to buy herself some time to process the impossible revelations. He answered them, but she barely heard the answers.

'No way! It can't be. I mean… yes, I made the connection between the two of them. And yes, Master Sunless… Saint Sunless… he warned me that he has a lot of secrets… but… but...'

Mostly, Nephis felt stunned.

There was a subtle hint of humiliation at being fooled, as well. Or rather, of being a fool.

But there was also something else.

Beneath the shock and rejection, she couldn't help but think...

Would it be so bad if the charming enchanter had turned out to be

the Lord of Shadows?

Nephis remembered her first meeting with the mysterious Saint. She would have lied if she said that he had not fascinated her. His power, his beautiful swordsmanship, his cold arrogance… back then, she had felt wistful, thinking… that it would have been so nice, to have a steady partner like that.

Someone who could keep up with her... an equal.

Of course, she had often wondered what was hiding behind the mask of the Lord of Shadows. It was a bit exciting to imagine. She was quite sure that he was young… but what did he look like? Was his face as cold and emotionless as his voice? Were his eyes as ruthless? Was he handsome?

He had to be, as a Saint...

Was he even a human?

Nephis had only been distracted from that fascination after stumbling into an unexpected relationship with Master Sunless, the charming and gentle enchanter… first a fake one, then less and less so.

She mentally replaced the ferocious mask with the beautiful face of Master Sunless… Saint Sunless.

Or whatever his name truly was.

He would look so out of place in the heavy onyx armor, wielding the great blade of the dark odachi.

But also… it fit so well.

His raven-black hair, his porcelain skin, his dark eyes. She could imagine it easily, a beautiful man like him sitting on an obsidian throne in the Nameless Temple, clad in intricate onyx armor and surrounded by eternal darkness.

'...How did I not realize it before!'

Nephis wanted to fall through the ground.

She feverishly went over every encounter with the Lord of Shadows, and then put them side by side with the time she had spent with Master Sunless.

The way he watched her practice swordsmanship…

The way he watched the lonesome tree in the courtyard of the dark temple…

The way he seemed to enjoy seeing people eat his food…

The way he seemed to prefer the solitude of the Nameless Temple despite surrounding himself with human-like shadows…

She swallowed some wine, not feeling its taste.

"Wait, wait… Sunless. Is that even your real name?"

Chapter-1814: Confession

"...Sunless. Is that even your real name?"

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

'Why is she…'

But then, it made sense.

He knew that his feelings for Nephis were real, and him being the Lord of Shadows did not change them. But, for her… she must have been questioning everything she knew about him. Every word he had uttered was under suspicion of being a lie, and every action he had taken was under suspicion of being premeditated and purposeful.

That was because, while Master Sunless was merely a person, the Lord of Shadows was something else.

He was one of the players in the grand game between the powers of this world.

Sunny lingered for a moment, then offered her a fragile smile.

"Sure. That is my real name. Well, actually, although it is my real name, most people call me Sunny. So… I was going to suggest that you call me that too, soon… today."

He faltered, then sighed.

"Listen. I want… first, I want to explain something. My intention was never to deceive you. I did not approach you with an ulterior motive, insinuating myself into your good graces for a nefarious purpose. In fact, I never expected to meet you at all. I mean… meet you here, in Bastion."

He wasn't being very eloquent, but there was no helping it. Sunny's

mind was in turmoil, and therefore, so were his words.

He sought a momentary refuge in the act of gulping down tea.

"It was… sort of like… like this. The Lord of Shadows was supposed to be a part of me that deals with the big picture. While Master Sunless, he wasn't supposed to have any purpose at all. He was just meant to live the life that I have always wanted to live, but was never able to.

A quiet and peaceful life away from bloodshed and strife, one that had nothing to do with the Sovereigns, the war, the Nightmare Spell, the gods and the daemons. The future."

Sunny sighed.

"I just wanted to manage a small shop and live quietly. Or rather… I wanted to let a part of me experience that bliss, at least. So that was what I did, and I never expected that a few days after the Lord of Shadows met you, you would walk into my shop. Actually… I was so startled that I fell… like a fool…"

Neph blinked.

"...That was why you were on the floor?"

Sunny coughed and scratched his head in embarrassment.

"Yeah."

She stared at him intently.

"Wait. What about the duel with Tristan of Aegis Rose?"

He looked down.

"Oh, that… I tried really hard not to hurt him. Too much."

Nephis opened her mouth to say something, then closed it again. Then, she opened it once more and covered it with a hand, as if mortified.

"Wait! So, when Effie… when she…"

Sunny smiled sheepishly.

"Ah, right. That happened, too. It was a bit funny, actually."

Effie was in a habit of belittling the Lord of Shadows in an earnest attempt to help out Master Sunless win Nephis over. Her clumsy attempts to help missed the mark completely, of course, but were strangely endearing.

Although… Nephis had indeed ended up seeing the humble shopkeeper in a favorable light. So maybe Effie actually knew what she was doing?

Sunny wasn't sure, at that point.

Noticing that Nephis seemed to have lost the ability to speak, he hesitated for a moment, and then said softly:

"When you walked into my shop, it was like two worlds colliding. Well, and after that… one thing led to the other… and before I knew it, we were in a contractual relationship, I was being knighted, and you were spending more time with me than with the Lord of Shadows. Who was supposed to be the only incarnation of mine to face you."

He hesitated for a moment.

"I knew that the best course of action would be to sever that connection and make sure that Master Sunless, the humble shopkeeper, never comes in contact with Changing Star of the Immortal Flame again. But… I was selfish, and I was greedy. And I went along with the flow, allowing it to pull me closer to you."

Nephis looked at him strangely, something flashing in her eyes.

Then, a slight frown creased her elegant brow.

She mumbled:

"Wait. But initially, I only trusted you… this version of you… because

Cassie had vouched that you could be trusted. And she would not have done something like that without a thorough investigation. How did she miss all these clues?"

Sunny almost choked on his tea.

Wiping his lips, he put the cup down and glanced at Nephis carefully.

'Ah…'

He said tentatively:

"Actually… Cassie was the first to find out. She made sure that I had no malice toward you, and tacitly agreed to keep my secret. For a bit. So that I could tell you myself, eventually."

The wine bottle... was slowly melting in Neph's hand.

Her voice trembled a little:

"Cassie knew?"

Sunny smiled awkwardly.

'Sorry, Cassie!'

"Ah… yes. We sort of… struck a deal. For reasons. But, you should know that she only has your best interests in mind. So, if you want to blame someone, blame me. She has really done the best she could.

It is me who's at fault."

Nephis stared at him silently for a while.

Then… she stared at him some more.

Sunny had a feeling that she was yelling at a certain blind seer currently, in her head.

He tried to imagine what Nephis was feeling.

His imagination failed.

Surely, she was shocked. Embarrassed, a little. Reeling.

But… maybe… was there no possibility that she was a little happy, as well?

The Lord of Shadows wasn't her enemy, after all. In fact, they had built some trust and rapport in the recent months. They had fought side by side. And he was someone anyone would wish to have by their side on the battlefield.

Someone who could support her on her treacherous path, not just treat her to a picnic between the calamitous battles.

Wouldn't it feel nice, to know that someone like that was also kind and caring… to her, at least… and that he was willing — longed for, really — to be more than just an ally?

Both the Lord of Shadows and Master Sunless were parts of Sunny. And together, they made someone who could stand side by side with Nephis wherever she went, and support her in whatever way she needed.

In short…

'I'm not that bad, am I?'

Nephis inhaled slowly, then said in a subdued tone:

"Which one of you is… the real you?"

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then said the truth:

"All of me is the real me."

He looked away.

"...It would be easy to say that one of my incarnations is a mask, and the other one is the true me. But that would be a lie. They are all me, and the only difference between them is the role they have to play. The Lord of Shadows is meant for war, and so, he is aloof and unyielding. Master Sunless is meant for peace, and so, he is soft and accommodating."

Sunny lingered for a moment, and then added quietly:

"I guess you can say that one of them is what I want to be, while the other is what I have to be. But that… is not really important. What's important is that…"

He looked at her with a pale smile.

"Both of them are me, and I am sincere in my feelings for you. You know it. You should have felt my longing."

Nephis studied his face for a long time.

Then, she nodded slowly.

And… blushed?

"I see. I… need to digest it. Sorry!"

'Wha…'

Before Sunny could react, beautiful white wings appeared behind Nephis, and she soared into the air, sending sand flying in all directions.

"Wait!"

He called after her, but she swiftly rose into the sky, and then disappeared in the direction of Bastion.

Sunny was left alone on the beach, frozen.

"You… you…"

He looked down, remained silent for a while, and grimaced.

"...You forgot to take your dress."

Indeed.

Nephis was in such a hurry to leave that she had forgotten to pick up her white summer dress. Of course, she could summon a Memory armor to cover her body at any moment… but still…

Sunny sighed deeply.

He didn't regret confessing his identity to her. He would have felt uncomfortable going further without doing that.

But he did regret it, a little.

Their perfect date was ruined.

And yet…

He looked at the sky silently.

There, at the end…

'Her reaction wasn't that bad, was it?'

It wasn't.

In fact… it was a little promising.

Chapter-1815: Stranded

The sky above the Moonriver Plain was grey and unfriendly. Drops of cold water were dribbling from above, and the winds were blowing above the barren wasteland, howling as they dove into the canyons.

Rain sat in front of the crackling fire for a few minutes, staring somberly into the distance. Her body was bruised, but there were no serious wounds. Her mind was clear.

It was just that the situation was a bit bleak.

Rain sighed heavily, then inspected her surroundings. Well… there wasn't much to inspect. The stony wasteland was nearly featureless. There were a few twisted, dead trees a dozen or so meters away. Beyond that, far away, stood a weathered ruin… the canyon was on the other side, a stone throw away.

Next, she inspected herself and grimaced. Rain was wearing her usual leather pants, henley, wool vest, and jacket. She was not going to suffer from the cold because her body was protected by her worn-out military bodysuit, but her warm coat was still in her pack… which was back with the survey team, full of survival equipment.

The last time she had seen her sword, it was impaling the abominable hand to the ground. Her bow and quiver were now somewhere at the bottom of the canyon. The only weapons she had left were the hunting knife in the sheath attached to the small of her back, and a dagger hidden in her boot.

It wasn't much.

However, what concerned Rain the most was not the lack of weapons, but the lack of simple tools. There was no food or water, either…

Luckily, there was a young lady from a noble clan. Tamar had to have a few useful Memories in her soul arsenal.

Rain rubbed her face, then rose and walked over to the unconscious girl. After inspecting her carefully, she scowled and cursed quietly through gritted teeth.

"Damnation…"

Tamar… wasn't in a good shape. She was not at death's door, but her body was terribly battered. Her face was bruised, and judging by a slight grimace that contorted it with each breath, so were her ribs. One of her arms was badly injured — if not for the vambrace of her enchanted armor, it would have been mangled even worse.

Worst of all, both of her legs seemed to be broken. She must have been slammed against the wall of the canyon or had been caught between rocks, being tossed around by the current. Well… it was already a miracle that they had managed to survive. In fact, Rain should have been worse off than Tamar, whose Awakened physique was much more robust.

Her teacher must have made rescuing her a priority.

Rain sighed deeply.

She wasn't particularly fond of the haughty Legacy, but there was also no animosity between them. So, seeing her in such a sorry state made Rain feel despondent.

Tamar had chosen to catch the falling laborer instead of saving herself, after all. If she had been more selfish, she might have avoided getting hurt altogether.

"Stupid woman…"

Rain stared at the unconscious girl for a while, then rose and walked away.

She returned a couple of minutes later, carrying a few sturdy branches.

Awakened were much stronger than mundane people, and could recover from many terrible wounds. They healed much faster. Tamar seemed to have already saturated her core, as well — at that despite only Awakening a couple of months ago.

'One of the perks of being a Legacy, I guess.'

She must have received a treasure trove of soul shards immediately after becoming an Awakened. Legacy clans were known to provide their young with a lot of support... granted, not quite to that degree. Clan Sorrow must have liked pampering young Tamar.

...Or rather, they probably were in a hurry to make her as strong as possible before the start of the war.

The thought made Rain feel cold.

In any case, Rain wasn't too concerned about the younger girl — she would make a full recovery before too long.

However, this was the Dream Realm. They were lost and far away from other humans. Their situation was rather precarious.

Taking off her jacket, Rain hesitated for a few moments and unsheathed her knife. She cut her henley and then tore off its sleeves with a regretful expression. Finally, she sat down on the ground and started to cut the sleeves into thin strips of fabric, meaning to make them into cords.

It was better to set Tamar's bones before she regained consciousness.

Once the cords were ready, Rain returned the knife into its sheath and approached the Legacy girl. Her greaves and cuisses were in the way, so Rain had to unstrap them.

Memory armor was rarely donned and stripped, since Awakened could simply summon and dismiss it. However, that did not mean that it couldn't be taken off normally. Granted, Rain wasn't very familiar with how all these plates of metal were fastened to a human body and each other. So, she fumbled a little.

She was in the process of trying to remove a greave when something

about her surroundings subtly changed. Looking up, she was a little startled to see that Tamar had opened her eyes and was staring at her dazedly.

"...What are you doing?"

The Legacy girl's voice sounded hoarse.

Rain looked down.

'Ah.'

From the side, it surely seemed like she was trying to loot the half-dead young lady for a pair of boots. Like a complete scoundrel.

Rain smiled sheepishly and then said in a friendly tone:

"Don't scream."

Tamar looked at her in confusion. Then, her eyes widened, and she let out a stifled groan.

The pain had finally caught up with her.

"Argh… aaah… damn it!"

The young Legacy slumped on the ground and gritted her teeth, reeling from pain.

Rain, meanwhile, let go of the greave and shook her head in dejection.

All that work, completely in vain.

She waved to attract Tamar's attention.

"Hey. Lady Tamar. Dismiss your armor."

Tamar looked at her silently for a few moments.

"...Why?"

Rain inhaled quietly, then tried her best to imitate the tone her mom

had used to make her younger self take medicine:

"Your legs are broken. I need to set the bones… well, unless you want them to heal wrong."

The young Legacy gritted her teeth, then raised her torso and looked down. A few moments later, she fell back on the ground, her face turning pale.

There was a long stretch of silence, and then, her plate armor collapsed into a whirlwind of sparks, leaving only the cloth underlayer behind. Tamar was left wearing only a simple white shirt and breeches, shivering slightly in the cold.

Rain hesitated a little before picking up her jacket and covering the younger girl with it. Then, she looked at her pale face from above.

"It's going to hurt a lot. Do you want to bite down on something?"

Tamar slowly shook her head.

"Just do it."

'Well, suit yourself.'

Rain returned to her feet, picked up on them gently, placed her hand on her calves, and said gingerly.

"Listen. I'm going to count to three. One…"

Without saying anything else, she pulled.

In the next moment, Tamar clenched her fists and let out a string of curses. Or at least she must have thought that they were curses — in fact, this proper young lady had no idea how to properly curse. It was a bit adorable.

"You… you said you would count to three!"

Rain shrugged nonchalantly.

"I lied."

Chapter-1816: Simple Porter

Tamar handled the pain surprisingly well. Rain herself was no stranger to pain, but she had never been hurt that badly. She wasn't sure if she could have maintained composure in a similar situation — at least without a dire need to stay composed.

Humans were wired to abhor pain, so there was nothing wrong with showing a bit of weakness.

But after that first string of curses, the young Legacy stayed silent and simply glared at Rain intensely. It was as if she was inviting her to try her worst.

'Weirdo.'

Luckily, Rain was quite good at treating injuries. All children learned the basic treatment procedures in school, and she had been additionally schooled on how to deal with most injuries in the wilderness by her teacher. So, Tamar did not have to suffer unnecessarily.

After the bones were set, Rain told her to summon back her boots, and then went about making splints from the branches and cords she had prepared.

While she busied herself with it, Tamar finally spoke:

"You… Rani…"

Rain glanced at her briefly, then looked back down.

'Huh. She remembers my name.'

"What?"

The Legacy girl inhaled slowly.

"Where are we?"

'Good question.'

Rain hesitated for a few moments, coming up with a believable lie. Sadly, the fact that they were alive was quite unbelievable.

But then again, the existence of her teacher was even harder to believe. So, any explanation she could come up with would sound more plausible than the truth.

Eventually, she said:

"I'm not sure, either. Somewhere downstream from where we fought the Tyrant. It looks like the river carried us pretty far… when I came about, I was laying on the edge of the canyon, with no trace of the others in sight. You were about a hundred meters downriver. That's all I know."

Tamar remained silent for a while.

"How did we survive?"

'A petty shadow rescued us from the current, then left us to fend for ourselves in the wilderness... because I hurt his feelings...'

She smiled faintly.

"No idea. I assumed it was because of some powerful life-saving Memory you have."

The young Legacy raised an eyebrow.

"There's no such thing."

Rain sighed.

"That's too bad."

Finally finished, she looked at Tamar and shrugged.

"Well, we're both alive. Now, we just need to make our way back to the main camp, and then we will even be able to keep staying alive.

Isn't that wonderful?"

The young Legacy looked at her somberly, not saying anything.

Rain smiled faintly.

"What? Why are you looking at me like that?"

Tamar glanced at splints on her legs, then faced her with a grim expression.

"We don't even know where we are. The wilderness is teeming with Nightmare Creatures. And I can't fight. How are we going to get to camp with me like that?"

Rain wasn't very concerned.

"What's the problem? Summon that Echo of yours, and let's ride it all the way back."

The young lady did not answer.

Her silence… was a little unnerving.

Rain frowned.

"Is there a problem?"

Tamar simply stared at her grimly for a bit, then said evenly:

"I can't summon my Echo."

Her words sent a chill running down Rain's spine. The giant wolf had been perfectly fine when they fell into the canyon… had it not? The two of them could easily survive the perilous journey with its help.

However, without the Echo, the situation would indeed be chillingly grim. Being lost in the wilderness of the Dream Realm with no tools and no weapons, with the sole Awakened warrior among the two of them suffering from heavy injuries… making it to the main camp in one piece seemed like a very distant possibility, to say the least.

Rain looked at Tamar, her frown deepening.

"Why? Was it destroyed?"

The young Legacy slowly shook her head.

"No, it's not destroyed."

Rain lingered for a moment, then rubbed her face tiredly.

"Then what's the problem?"

Tamar remained silent for a few seconds.

"The survey team is lacking a melee fighter now. Ray can do a lot of damage from stealth, but he is not well-suited for direct combat. Without that Echo, the team will suffer heavy casualties… if they can even make it back to the main camp. They won't have a way to cross the canyons, either. The mission will fail."

Rain stared at her incredulously.

After a while, she said:

"So… it's not that you can't summon the Echo. You won't summon the Echo. Because you would rather die than put the team — and your mission — at risk."

Tamar nodded.

"That's right."

A strange smile appeared on Rain's lips.

"That is very noble of you, Lady Tamar. It's commendable that you have decided to die for your duty. But what about me? Isn't it a bit strange that you have also decided that I will die to uphold your duty? Doesn't seem very fair."

The young Legacy frowned.

"Have you no loyalty? Those people are your comrades, and our mission is important for the future of the Song Domain. We… we must be ready to sacrifice for the greater good."

Rain laughed.

"Loyalty? I am sorry, Lady Tamar… I am a hired laborer. I get paid a pitiful amount of coins to carry rocks and do tedious chores. Am I supposed to die for the right to carry rocks or for the privilege to do chores? I've been only doing that to put food on my plate. The only thing I'm loyal to is my stomach."

Tamar glared at her with indignation, then took a deep breath and grew quiet.

Sprawling on the ground in exhaustion and clearly suffering from pain, she remained silent for a few moments, then sighed.

"...You're right. You are not a Legacy, or even a soldier. So, I can't expect you to understand. Still… I won't compromise the entire survey team for the sake of one member. I won't leave them without the protection of the Echo."

Rain sighed inwardly.

'Stubborn fool..'

Tamar, meanwhile, looked at her with a grave expression.

"But I also can't expect you to share my burden. So… leave me. Your legs are perfectly fine. You stand a chance of making it back alive without me. I've seen your skill — you are not defenseless. So, I'll… I'll give you a few of my Memories.

You won't be able to use the enchantments, but they will still be helpful. If you are careful enough and lucky enough, you'll survive."

Rain studied her pale, determined face silently.

After a while, she asked in a neutral tone:

"So, that's your plan? To send me off and stay here, immobilized, to die on your own?"

Tamar raised her chin arrogantly.

"Who says I'll die? I'll crawl and find a good place to hide. In a week or two, the survey team will reach the main camp. Then… someone will come to find me. I just need to last for a while."

Her tone was confident, but her words did not sound very convincing.

Rain did not say anything for a while, then massaged her temples with a grimace.

Eventually, she said:

"Fine. Don't summon your damned Echo. Instead, summon a rope. Or a cloak… something like that."

Tamar frowned in confusion.

"A… a rope? What for?"

Rain stood up and raised her hands above her head, stretching her body. She could feel strength returning to her limbs.

"Because I am going to drag you to the main camp instead of that Echo. If I have to. You did save my life back in the canyon, after all. I might be a simple porter, but I'm not an ingrate… my mom taught me better."

She had decided to stay with Tamar.

After all, there should not be a lot of difference between carrying rocks and carrying a slim Legacy girl…

They were going to make it back together, or not at all.

Chapter-1817: Shelter and Food

Among Tamar's Memories, there was an enchanted cloak. Its enchantment wasn't very useful in their current situation, but the cloak itself was just what Rain needed.

Harvesting two long branches from the dead trees, she used it to create a makeshift stretcher. Rain held the front end of the stretcher, while the rear end dragged on the ground. For the young Legacy, it wasn't the most comfortable way to travel — but if she was suffering, she did not let it show.

As for Rain herself, she quickly warmed up from the strain. Hauling Tamar over a long distance in this manner was not very plausible, but luckily, they weren't going far just yet.

For now, their plan was to find shelter and wait for about ten days before summoning the Echo. That much time should be enough for the survey team to return to the main construction camp, or at least get close to it. So, all Rain and Tamar had to do was survive that long.

It was especially important that Tamar remained alive, because with her death, the Echo would disappear as well. Then, the survey team would be in peril…

Remembering the porters she had become friends with, Rain grimaced. She had put on a cynical facade in front of the young Legacy, and although there was some truth to her words, in all honesty, she wasn't willing to save herself by sacrificing those people, either.

Plus, Rain was not helpless. Although the Moonriver Plain was much more dangerous than the wild reaches around Ravenheart, she still stood a fair chance of surviving here.

'I'll take it one step at a time.'

For now, they had to find shelter. Then, procure food and water. After that… she was going to think about it later.

Soon, the ruins drew near. They were too large to be a solitary building, but too small to be the remains of a town. Stone walls rose from the ground, once tall and magnificent, now crumbling and covered in cracks. Rainwater was spilling out of the cracks, and it seemed as if the ruins were weeping.

There was no telling what that place had been once, and currently, Rain wasn't that interested in solving the mystery.

Instead, her gaze fell on the ground and grew tense.

'Damn it.'

She stopped without approaching the ruins and gently placed the stretcher on the ground. Tamar's face paled from the jolt, but she stubbornly refused to let her pain show.

"What is it?"

Rain studied the ground with a somber expression. A few moments later, she sighed.

"There are prints on the ground."

Tamar turned her head to look.

There were indeed traces of something having stalked this area in the mud. The prints weren't too large, and were clearly animalistic in nature. Judging by their size and depths, the creature — or creatures — weren't too large.

Still, it was a cause for concern.

The ruins Rain had hoped to take shelter in were occupied.

The two young women looked at each other silently.

Eventually, Tamar asked:

"What do you want to do? We... we can go further away from the canyon."

Rain remained silent for a while, then slowly shook her head.

"There's no point. Whatever it is that lives in the ruins will be faster than us, by far. Once it crawls out and catches our scent, it will find us no matter how much distance we can cover before nightfall."

Which wasn't much distance at all.

The state of the paw prints hinted that they had been left many hours, but less than a day ago. So, Rain suspected that the inhabitant of the ruins was a nocturnal predator. Even if she hauled Tamar away with all her strength, they were not going to outrun a Nightmare Creature.

She sighed.

"It has to die."

Rain looked at Tamar, then asked her to summon her Memory weapons. Soon, a small arsenal appeared from sparks of light on the ground in front of her.

The brutish zweihander was a beautiful and fearsome weapon… not to mention utterly deadly. Unfortunately, Rain could barely lift it — she could muster just enough strength to swing it from side to side in a crude and graceless arc, but there was no hope of doing that with any semblance of speed and accuracy. Which meant death in an actual battle.

To her delight, Tamar possessed an enchanted bow and a quiver of arrows, as well. But… Rain could not even draw the bow. It was too heavy, and one would have to have a bear's strength to bend its limbs.

There was a beautifully austere battle spear, as well. Sadly, it was even worse than the zweihander. While its weight wasn't as great, the balance was different, so Rain almost toppled while trying to lift it.

Dejected, she stared at Tamar for a few moments, gaining a new appreciation for the younger girl's slender physique.

'How is she so strong with a body like that?'

The young Legacy had been brandishing the brutish greatsword with elegant ease, and even jumping over canyons while wielding it. Awakened possessed immense physical prowess, but Tamar seemed especially strong, or at least knew how to utilize her strength especially well.

Shaking her head, Rain gave up on the young Legacy's main weapons.

Instead, she only picked up a kindjal — a simple double-edged dagger with a straight blade and a sharp tapered tip. It had no guard or decorations to speak of, but there was a lethal beauty to its simplicity.

The length of its broad blade was a bit too long to be a dagger, but a bit too short to be a short sword.

Rain weighed it in her hand and nodded.

"I'm off."

Tamar grimaced and tried to crawl off her stretcher.

"Wait…"

She picked up the enchanted bow and pulled the quiver closer to herself, then sat up, facing the ruins.

"If it's… if you can't handle it, draw it into the open. I'll try to bring it down from the ground."

Rain studied her for a few moments with a neutral expression.

She was trying not to smile.

Tamar's intent was gravely serious, but with her legs outstretched and fixed straight by splints, she looked a bit comical, sitting there on the ground like a doll.

Eventually, Rain gave her a nod, gripped the enchanted dagger, and headed for the ruins.

The shape of the weapon was only marginally more advantageous than her hunting knife. However, it was a genuine Memory — and of the Ascended Rank, no less.

Even if Rain could not use any of the dagger's enchantments, its sharpness alone would be of great help.

Feeling tense and uneasy, she silently entered the ruins. A few moments later, her figure was swallowed by darkness.

Tamar was left sitting in the mud, gripping her bow tightly. The jacket Rani had lent her fell to the ground, but she could not even feel the cold. Looking down at the jacket, she noticed that it was lined with a fine alloy mesh — the stitching was very neat, but it had clearly been reinforced to become a makeshift piece of protective gear by hand.

She stared at the jacket for a few moments, surprised. Tamar was no stranger to all kinds of armor — however, as a Legacy, she had always been meant to become an Awakened. So, the armor she was knowledgeable about was in the form of powerful Memories and defensive Aspect Abilities.

Such a minuscule, mundane method of protection as lining one's jacket with reinforced alloy would have never crossed her mind.

It was so strange.

Rani herself was strange.

She seemed… too calm, and too capable. Most of all, her mental fortitude was entirely out of place. By all accounts, she should have been terrified and on the verge of panicking. It was Tamar who was supposed to be the one to maintain her composure in any situation, as an Awakened warrior should.

And yet, why did it seem as if Rani was more prepared to face the horrors of the Dream Realm than she was?

As if, for her, all of it was just a normal Tuesday.

'...Can she be a Valor spy?'

That would be reasonable. However… somehow, Tamar did not believe it.

She gritted her teeth and faced the ruins.

For a few minutes, there was only silence.

And then, the silence was torn apart by a chilling roar.

Deep within the ruins, a heavy object collided against the stones. She heard a faint sound of something sharp grinding against the ancient walls. One of them seemed to crumble with a loud crack.

Tamar raised her bow and prepared to draw the string.

…A while later, a slender figure walked out of the darkness.

Rani's clothes were soaked with blood, but the blood was too dark to have come from a human. Her expression was nonchalant.

She was wiping the blade of the enchanted dagger on the sleeve of a black military bodysuit as she walked.

Approaching Tamar, the strange porter flashed her a smile.

"An Awakened Beast. We were lucky."

Tamar looked up, staring at the mundane girl silently.

'...Is that what she calls lucky?'

An Awakened Beast was supposed to be a herald of death for a mundane human. Even the government soldiers used heavy suits of mechanised armor and powerful rifles to face one.

Soon, Rani dragged her into the ruins. Finally sheltered from rain, Tamar felt a little better.

They entered a spacious hall in the central structure of the ruin. It

was dark inside, but that did not prevent her from seeing the body of a large beast laying on the stone floor. The lower part of its body was buried under rubble, and its throat was savagely slit, seeping with blood.

Sitting down on the floor, Rani leaned back tiredly.

After a few moments of silence, she suddenly smiled.

"Here's shelter. And look…"

She pointed at the dead abomination.

"There's food."

Her smile dimmed a little.

"Now, I just need to find water…"

Chapter-1818: Moment of Respite

Even though Rain did not show it, she was still reeling from the short, but lethal battle with the Awakened Beast.

A creature like that was not something she had not faced before, but those encounters had always been preceded by careful planning and preparation. Challenging an abomination as powerful as that blind was a chilling experience.

Luckily, the beast had been slumbering deeply when Rain entered the ruins. She stalked them silently, found the enemy, and managed to devise a feasible plan without alerting the abomination.

Then, she cut her arm and stirred the Nightmare Creature awake with the scent of blood. Luring it out of its lair, Rain toppled a badly damaged stone wall on the beast, burying it under rubble. The enemy was immobilized — even if only for a few moments. So, she rushed in, dodged its deadly claws deftly, and sliced its throat open with the sharp blade of the Ascended dagger.

It all ended in a heartbeat. Rain wasn't even injured… much. Of course, she could have very well lost her life. One mistake was all it took to die. If she had hesitated even a little or had been a split second too late to dodge the monstrous claws, the beast would have been gnawing on her bones by now.

But it was dead instead.

So… it all worked out, in the end.

'I don't like it.'

Rain had grown accustomed to hunting Nightmare Creatures, but the

lack of control in this improvised battle made her feel uneasy. She didn't like gambling with her life.

Letting out a sigh, she glanced at Tamar and then went about making a fire. The young Legacy had a tinderbox Memory, so Rain did not have to go through the tedious motions of forcing the damp wood to catch flame by hand. Soon, the ruin was illuminated by warm orange light, and the two of them were warming themselves in front of the fire.

The rain had turned into a dribble by then, so she couldn't collect rainwater anymore — at least not conveniently.

'It would be easier to wait for the canyon to fill with water once again.'

She would walk there later. Rain had to scout their surroundings, anyway.

For now, though…

She weighed the enchanted dagger in her hand once again, then sighed and rose to her feet.

"Wait here."

Dragging the carcass of the dead beast outside with some effort, Rain dressed it down and salvaged a fair deal of meat. She had no salt to cure it, and there was not enough wood to smoke it. So, most of the meat was destined to spoil shortly.

If they were lucky, though, it could last them just long enough.

Returning inside, Rain skewered the meat on sticks and began to roast it. It would have been better to do it over coals, but open fire worked, as well.

Tamar observed her actions silently. All in all, she was holding up well despite the terrible injuries.

After a while, the young Legacy asked:

"Rani… who are you?"

Rain raised an eyebrow.

"What do you mean? I'm a porter. Before that, I was a laborer in the main construction camp. They pay members of survey teams much more, so I volunteered."

Tamar scrutinized her for a few moments, then shook her head.

"You are too skilled to be a simple porter. Archery, swordsmanship, wilderness survival. Most of all, your mentality is not that of a mundane person."

Rain looked at her dubiously.

"I'm sorry, Lady Tamar… but have you spent a lot of time with mundane people?"

The younger girl frowned.

"What do you mean?"

Rain smiled and concentrated on the roasting meat.

"I mean that you Legacies are a bit isolated from the rest of us mundane folks. You grow up being trained by your clans instead of going to school, and only attend the Academy for a month or two to make connections with fellow Sleepers. Then, you assume an important position and spend all your time surrounded by Awakened warriors. So, how would you even know what a mundane person should be like?"

She glanced at Tamar and shrugged.

"Well, alright. I might be a bit of an outlier. But, still… why can't I have great combat skills? Every child in the world is trained to be able to defend themselves. I trained especially diligently, both in school and with private tutors. That was because once upon a time, a Nightmare Gate opened near me.

So, I was motivated."

Rain paused for a moment, and then added with a shrug:

"I worked long and hard to prepare myself for the First Nightmare. It was just that my Nightmare never came — I wasn't chosen by the Spell, and remained mundane. There is no inherent difference in skill or determination between mundane people and Awakened, wouldn't you say? It's just a matter of luck."

Tamar studied her for a bit, then asked:

"That might have been so in the past, but the situation is different now. With your talent and skill, you stand a great chance of surviving the First Nightmare. So why didn't you apply to challenge one? All you had to do was return to the waking world, and let the Spell take you. Your training would not have been wasted."

Rain remained silent, then sighed.

"People don't just risk their lives for no good reason. I value my life a lot, you know. Because there is someone out there who treasures it."

Her expression turned somber.

She hesitated for a few moments, and then added:

"My older brother died challenging a Nightmare. My parents have suffered enough, so I don't want to risk putting them through that pain again."

Rain did not expect the proud Legacy to understand — Legacies were a ruthless bunch, after all.

But, to her surprise, Tamar seemed to feel her words deeply.

The younger girl lowered her head and looked at the ground.

After a while, she said stiffly:

"...Mine too."

Rain looked at her in confusion.

"What?"

Tamar sighed.

"My older brother died challenging a Nightmare, too. He was much older than me, and very talented. The pride of our clan. He became a Master at an early age, and challenged the Third Nightmare after a while. And died there."

Her expression was stoic, but her voice was tinged with heavy emotions.

Eventually, the young Legacy shrugged.

"Well, the age gap between us was too big, so I did not know him well. I just thought I'd share… since you did first."

Rain looked at her quietly for a while, then turned away.

"Thank you for sharing."

With that, she pushed a skewer of roasted meat into Tamar's hand and rose to her feet.

"Now eat. I'll go scout the surroundings a bit."

Rain left the ruin and explored the area a little, eating the meat as she walked. Eventually, she made her way to the edge of the canyon.

All in all, the situation seemed much less dire than she had expected. There did not seem to be any more Nightmare Creatures around, which meant that they would probably be able to hide in the ruins for many days.

Now, she just needed to collect water.

Sitting at the edge of the canyon, Rain sighed and looked down, into its dark depths, waiting for the chasm to start weeping.

'What will I use to collect water? Unless Tamar has a suitable Memory, her helmet will have to do…'

At that moment, her body suddenly tense, and her eyes widened.

Her expression froze.

Because she saw…

Out there in the depths of the canyon, a massive shadow was moving.

Grabbing onto the rocks with its countless hands.

Chapter-1819: Pursued

Rain froze, afraid to move.

There, below her, far away, something was moving in the darkness. Sunlight did not reach that deep into the canyon, but she was still able to discern a vague and frightening shape.

The creature was immense and hunched, with countless arms protruding like a sinewy forest from its massive hump. She thought she saw a clawed hand reaching up to grab the weathered rocks, and in the next moment, an echoing sound of rolling stones rose from the canyon.

Rain's whole body grew tense.

The Awakened Tyrant they had fought before falling into the river seemed to be alive. Worse than that, it was here now, either by coincidence or because it had followed their scent.

For a moment, her heart was drowned with fear.

She had battled and slain many Nightmare Creatures. Most of them were dormant, while some were Awakened. The strongest of them had been the Huntsman... and she barely survived that fight.

There was no chance that she would be able to survive a battle against an Awakened Tyrant. That creature was not something a mundane person could ever kill. Not even an Awakened would face it alone — even a full cohort was not always enough to deal with a Tyrant.

To Rain, the hideous abomination was like a herald of death.

...Still, she forced herself to calm down. Fear was not going to help her.

What would, though?

Nothing came to mind.

'Run. We must run.'

That was the only logical conclusion.

Forgetting to breathe, Rain slowly backed away from the edge, trembled as she turned her back to it, and silently rose to her feet. Then, She took several cautious steps forward, and broke into a sprint.

'Damn it, damn it, damn it…'

So much for hiding from danger in the ruins. So much for waiting for ten days. Not only had danger found them, but it was also of a kind that they had no hope against.

Rain glanced at her shadow and hesitated, not knowing if she should say something. Her teacher had been strangely silent since the morning, as if he wasn't there at all...

In the end, she didn't say anything.

Entering the ruins, she saw that Tamar was laying on the floor, staring at the ceiling with a bleak expression on her face. The younger girl was in terrible shape, so Rain had hoped that she would have an opportunity to rest and recover a little.

Sadly, that was not in the cards anymore.

Noticing Rain's hurried motions and grim expression, Tamar rose on an elbow and scowled.

"What's the matter?"

Rain was already rolling the strips of monster meat into her jacket, knowing that hunger and physical strain did not go well together. In the wilderness, food was life, and hunger was death.

"Get on the stretcher."

She paused for a moment, and then added darkly:

"The damned Tyrant has followed us. It is climbing up the canyon."

Tamar's eyes widened.

She froze for a moment, then gritted her teeth and silently crawled onto the makeshift stretcher.

Rain threw the rolled jacket to her, then grabbed the handles and grunted.

'Ah…'

The young Legacy girl wasn't exactly heavy, but she still weighed much more than Rain could carry comfortably. Worse still, that weight wasn't distributed evenly between her shoulders and waist, like that of a backpack would. Dragging her to the ruins was a bit of an exercise… but would Rain be able to drag the stretcher across many kilometers of rough terrain?

Not without killing herself, most likely.

'Curse it all!'

There was no time to think. For now, she had to create as much distance between them and the Tyrant as possible. There was still a possibility that the creature had been carried to this corner of the Moonriver Plain by the same current as them — so, it could have been here by coincidence. In that case, they still had a chance to escape.

If not…

"Let's go."

Rain dragged the stretcher out of the ruin and hesitated for a few moments, a lost look on her face.

Where were they supposed to head?

Every direction was the same — except for where the canyon, and

the Tyrant, were. So, Rain felt inclined to rush in the opposite direction from the abomination, going west.

But she decided to ask Tamar's opinion first.

As if guessing her thoughts, the Legacy girl spoke quietly from the stretcher.

"The canyons of the Moonriver Plain typically stretch from north to south. We have been carried far south by the river — so, the main camp should be somewhere northwest of our position."

She hesitated a little, and then added:

"However, we don't know how far we were carried, exactly. It may be more prudent to head further south, instead. That way, we might reach the edge of the plain and find the Lake of Tears."

The Lake of Tears and the great waterfall, Weeping Goddess, were where Clan Sorrow's Citadel stood.

Rain remained motionless for a few moments, considering her options.

The main construction camp of the road crew was northwest of their position. The Lake of Tears was somewhere south. The problem was that they did not know which one was closer.

Eventually, she decisively turned south.

Her choice was very simple, and had nothing to do with distance. She chose the Lake of Tears simply because they would have to follow along the canyon to reach it… which meant that they would most likely not have to cross other canyons on the way.

With Tamar incapacitated, crossing even one could become an insurmountable obstacle — not even taking into account that they might end up being pursued by an Awakened Tyrant. Wasting time was a luxury they did not have.

So, really, the Lake of Tears was not the best choice. It was simply the only choice.

Gritting her teeth, Rain strained her tired body and pulled the heavy stretcher south.

At that moment, she was thankful for the cloudy sky and the cold dribble. Even though her face and hair were already damp, the dust covering the stony plain had turned to mud. Because of that, it was easier to drag the stretcher across it.

She was still struggling, though.

'I'll need to come up with a better way.'

Somewhere behind them, there were more sounds of rocks falling deep in the canyon. The Tyrant was already close to crawling out of the darkness.

Rain hurried her steps.

Chapter-1820: Waiting for Rain

In the end, her worst expectations had not come true.

But it was very close.

The Tyrant had not happened to be there by coincidence. It was, in fact, following their scent. Rain saw from afar as its ugly shape rose from the canyon, pulling itself onto the stone with a dozen monstrous hands. The creature looked like a hideous giant that was on the verge of toppling under the weight of its bulging hump.

However, it wasn't really a hunchback. Instead, the mound on its back was simply there to allow for countless arms to protrude forward, all ending with terrifying claws.

The most eerie part was that the abomination looked vaguely human-like, as if it had been a person once. If it had, then it must have been eons ago.

After climbing out of the canyon, the Tyrant spent some time wandering near the edge, its oversized head low to the ground. Dragging Tamar away with all her might, Rain couldn't help but glance back, into the distance, from time to time.

She couldn't understand what the Tyrant was doing.

But when it wandered to the ruins, spent some time there, then stumbled south, she realized something.

The abomination was sniffing for their scent.

That would mean that they were done for… only it didn't. Because there was one detail playing to their advantage.

The Tyrant was blind.

Rain herself had blinded it, putting two arrows through its eyes. So, even though the creature seemed hellbent on following them, it couldn't simply rush in their direction. It had to follow their scent laboriously, stumbling across rough terrain as it forged a path forward.

Its hatred seemed to be truly boundless, though, because even after a few hours, the ghastly figure could still be seen far in the distance, wandering the plain in search of them. They couldn't lose it.

'Curses…'

Rain was slowly increasing the distance between them and the tyrant. Her arms were on fire, as if her muscles would melt at any moment. Her breathing had turned hoarse, and she felt like she was drowning. It took all of her resolve and determination to keep pushing forward, dragging the makeshift stretcher behind her.

Just a few hours had passed, and she was already in such a sorry state. So, despite the fact that the distance was increasing, Rain did not feel at ease.

That was because she knew that she wouldn't be able to keep this pace up indefinitely. More than that, once the night fell, they would have to stop.

She would need to rest. Tamar was not doing too well, either — with her injuries, what she needed was to remain still and recuperate, not be jolted painfully every few moments as her stretcher dragged across bumps and creases. Her broken legs had to be a cause of constant torment.

Even if Rain could push through her exhaustion and Tamar could endure the rough handling, it was simply too dangerous to travel across the Moonriver Plain at night. Despite the abundance of moonlight, it would still be dark, and the fact that there was a Nightmare Creature pursuing them did not mean that there would be none ahead of them.

'Bad, bad. It's bad!'

Unlike them, the Tyrant did not need to rest. It was not afraid of the darkness, either. So, Rain had to get as far away from him as possible before nightfall, so that they would not be caught until dawn.

What would happen if the abomination did find them?

Sucking in a hoarse breath, Rain glanced at her shadow again.

Her teacher was mercurial and unfathomable, but she was pretty sure that he would not let her die.

What about Tamar, though? Would his benevolence extend to a stranger from a Legacy clan? She wasn't sure.

The lives of the survey team members were also tied to Tamar's life.

So, Rain could not stop.

'I'm going to die…'

It felt like she would die from the strain long before the abomination caught her.

And yet, she persisted.

…By the time the sun disappeared behind the horizon and the three moons rose into the sky, she could barely feel her hands. But she could not see the Tyrant anymore, either.

Rain found a stone mound to shield them from the wind and placed the stretcher down. Then, she simply fell to the ground, breathing heavily.

She was so tired that she couldn't move. Tamar wasn't much better, laying motionlessly on the stretcher. Her face was even paler than before.

The barren land was bathed in moonlight. In the darkness, its harsh desolation looked beautiful and shrouded in mystery. A myriad of bright stars shimmered in the sky, veiled here and there by heavy clouds.

"Rani… are you alive?"

Tamar's voice sounded weak.

Despite everything, Rain couldn't help but chuckle.

"It seems so."

After a while, she asked in a subdued tone:

"Do you think that the Queen's authority extends this far? If we die... will we turn into pilgrims?"

Tamar remained silent for a while, then said evenly:

"Of course. Otherwise, you would have already fallen into the First Nightmare."

Rain sighed. She couldn't argue with the truth.

Some time later, she finally mustered enough strength to sit up. Leaning on the cold surface of the stone mound, Rain stared at the sky dejectedly.

She was suffering from thirst even more than she did from physical exhaustion. So, she hoped that rain would come.

'With a name like mine, can't the heavens be a little merciful?'

A strong enough downpour could wash away their scent, as well.

Deciding to be optimistic, Rain asked Tamar to summon her helmet.

They consumed some of the remaining meat in silence.

Afterwards, the young Legacy looked at her somberly and said in a subdued tone:

"...You can just leave me behind and save yourself, you know."

If Rain wasn't slowed down by the need to drag her wounded companion along, she would have had a much higher chance of escaping from the Tyrant. That much was obvious.

She scratched the back of her head and answered half-heartedly:

"Aren't we heading for the Lake of Tears? That is where your clan's Citadel is located. What am I supposed to say if I show up there alone? Sorry, I left your daughter to die because she was too heavy? I doubt they'll welcome me warmly after that…"

Tamar looked at her silently for a few moments. Unexpectedly, a faint smile eventually appeared on her face.

"...I'm not that heavy."

Rain sighed.

"And I'm not that strong. Now… go to sleep. You need rest. We'll move on at dawn, so there's no time to waste. I'll take the first watch and wake you up at midnight."

Tamar wanted to say something, but just nodded silently in the end. It had been a terribly long day, and she must have been mentally exhausted from dealing with the pain and mental burden. Soon, her eyes closed, and she swiftly fell asleep.

Rain studied the sleeping girl's face for a few minutes, then took a deep breath and stared into the darkness.

Despite the terrible fatigue, despite being tormented by thirst… she still knew what she had to do.

'If you want to get out of here alive, all you need to do is Awaken.'

That was what her teacher had said.

So, Rain sat motionlessly, felt the flow of soul essence within her, and concentrated deeply, making it revolve faster and faster.

After a while…

She felt cold drops falling on her face. A minute later, the rain had turned heavy, shrouding the world with a rustling veil.

Never losing control of her essence, Rain smiled, picked up Tamar's

helmet, and crawled out from beneath the overhanging stone ridge.

Placing the helmet on the ground, she allowed the downpour to pelt her freely and continued to force her essence into a raging whirlpool.

Deep within her soul, another grain of sand was being formed.

'Teacher is always right…'

Chapter-1821: A Thousand Steps

Despite how tired Rain was, how badly she needed reprieve, she still sat on the ground and circulated her essence. Her body was absolutely motionless, but her soul was like a raging whirlpool.

At the heart of the whirlpool, soul essence was being refined into solid form by the crushing pressure. There were plenty of radiant grains there, already, sparkling like gemstones as they spun and collided. Rain could almost hear the melodious ringing, and feel her soul tremble slightly with each clash.

However, the brilliant gemstones were unable to fuse, yet. There weren't enough of them for that to happen.

She had to create more.

But it was such a slow and arduous process...

Rain was already doing much better than anyone was supposed to. After years of slaying Nightmare Creatures, her essence was especially potent. Her control of it was both forceful and intricate, remarkably precise — at least for someone below the Ascended Rank.

All she needed was time.

Sadly, Rain wasn't sure that she had any time left.

'I'm not fast enough…'

Deeply concerned, she gritted her teeth and concentrated wholly on controlling her essence.

When the moons reached the apogee of the cloudy sky, she allowed the raging whirlpool of her soul to dissipate and slumped, feeling like she was about to pass out from fatigue. Dragging Tamar's conical

helmet over with a weak hand, she drank half of the water that had accumulated inside and finally felt alive again.

A little.

Then, Rain woke the young Legacy up and curled on the ground, instantly falling asleep.

In the morning, her entire body felt broken. Rain had told Tamar that they would move on as soon as dawn broke, but in the end, they spent more time under the rock outcropping.

Rain knew that she wouldn't endure another day of dragging the stretcher with her hands, so something had to be done. After thinking for a while, she unsheathed her hunting knife and carefully separated the alloy mesh from the lining of her military jacket.

The alloy wire was very fine, but incredibly durable. She spent a lot of time patiently dismantling the mesh with the help of Tamar's enchanted dagger, then weaving the wires together. In the end, Rain was left with several meters of crude alloy rope.

The young Legacy was observing with an incredulous expression. Her pallor had become a little better, but she still looked terrible.

In fact, both of them did.

Tamar had always maintained a valiant and dashing image, quite in line with her exalted status as the daughter of an old Legacy clan. Rain might not have had the same background, but she still endeavored to look if not refined, then at least decent.

Now, both of them were dirty and wretched.

They were covered in mud from head to toe, with sunken eyes and chapped lips. Their hair was damp and tangled. Their clothes might have had color once, but now they were indistinguishable from the surrounding dirt.

It was a complete disgrace.

Looking at Rain, then at herself, Tamar smiled faintly.

"...Aren't we a sight to behold?"

It was good to see that she still had enough spirit to be humorous in this situation.

Continuing to weave wire rope, Rain smiled, as well.

"Indeed. Aren't we lucky that the Tyrant is blind? At least it won't be offended by our appearance when it eats us."

Listening to Tamar chuckle in a weak voice, she fashioned one end of the wire rope into a simple harness, then secured the other end to the stretcher. Putting the harness on herself, Rain gave it a cautious tug.

'Much better.'

By then, she could already see the hideous giant far away in the distance. The abomination had not lost track of them despite the heavy rain. It was still following their scent, albeit a little slower.

'Of course it is.'

"We have to go."

Tamar had seen the Tyrant, as well. Rain noticed that she never looked at it directly, keeping the creature in the periphery of her vision — just like Rain herself had been trained to do by her teacher.

Many Nightmare Creatures could sense when a gaze was directed at them. So, she had been taught to never look at abominations directly when stalking them.

'I guess Legacy training has something in common with mine.'

She wondered who had it tougher, and decided that it was probably her.

Helping Tamar onto the stretcher, Rain took a step forward. The wire rope dug into her skin, but it was much easier to pull the stretcher that way… which was not to say that it was easy.

Rain still struggled against the heavy weight.

She sighed quietly and gritted her teeth.

Hooking her fingers under the wire rope to spare her chest and abdomen from being cut by it, she leaned her body forward and pulled. Rain was like a beast of burden, and the stretcher was like a strange mud sled.

She was curious to see how long she would endure.

Step, step. Another step.

A thousand steps.

More...

The world narrowed down to a patch of drying mud in front of her, the feeling of the wire rope cutting into her shoulder, and the depleting struggle to pull the stretcher forward.

The air flowed into her lungs as she breathed hoarsely.

For a while, her mind was empty of thought, full of only the harsh sensation of physical strain.

Rain was doing fine for an hour or two, but then, a sense of deep, suffocating exhaustion slowly seeped into her muscles, filling her body with lead. The horizon seemed as distant as it had been before, and the barren wasteland was unchanged. She felt like she had made no progress at all, and therefore, her silent torment felt endless.

The lumbering silhouette of the blind Tyrant was still following them, far behind, prowling low to the ground.

Rain pushed forward stubbornly.

But at the same time…

A cold realization sent chills running down her spine.

'It's hopeless.'

She wasn't one to give up without a fight, but she also knew better

than to fight a hopeless battle.

And this desperate struggle of hers was already lost.

Rain might be able to stay ahead of the Tyrant for a while — maybe for a day, or even a few. But sooner or later, the abuse she was putting her body through would take its toll. At some point, she wouldn't be able to keep the pace anymore. Then, she wouldn't be able to take another step, or even rise from the ground.

That was if nothing else killed her before that happened.

So, all she could do… was keep walking forward and pray that some miracle would save them. Maybe, if she bought enough time, they would stumble on a passing Saint who happened to be traversing the Moonriver Plain by chance. Maybe another abomination would get into a fight with the Tyrant, dealing it a grievous wound. Maybe… maybe…

They would get lucky.

But Rain was not willing to entrust her life to dumb luck.

She had to think of something.

She continued to pull the stretcher across the mud, slowly forcing her mind to wake up from the numb slumber.

There had to be a way out. There always was.

After a dozen more steps… or maybe a thousand…

Rain's dark eyes suddenly glistened with ferocious determination.

Chapter-1822: Miraculous Feat

Actually, Rain already knew what miracle could save her. It wasn't a miracle that could happen to her, but rather a miracle she could make happen.

It was her Awakening.

Just like her teacher had said, it was the only solution to this lethal predicament.

The problem was that the formation of her soul core was far away, while the Tyrant was too close. The abomination was not drawing closer yet, but it would soon.

If Rain could rest with no distraction and concentrate on meditating steadily, there would have been hope of Awakening before the hideous giant caught its prey. But she had to escape from it, dragging Tamar across the wasteland, from dusk till dawn.

She had to rest at night to recover at least some of her strength, so there were only a few short hours for her to circulate her essence while keeping watch.

Those hours were woefully insufficient for the task at hand.

But actually…

Wasn't she looking at it all wrong?

Rain remembered the previous night. The cool sensation of water droplets falling on her face, the joy she felt. Back then, she was circulating her essence. She took Tamar's helmet and moved it from below the overhanging stone ridge to catch the rain, hoping to quench her unbearable thirst.

Which proved something vital.

It was that she could move and control her essence at the same time. As long as her concentration wasn't broken, Rain could do whatever she wanted while forming her core.

Of course, it wasn't easy to keep her essence under control when doing something else. It was already hard enough to maintain the raging whirlpool while in a state of perfect peace, not to mention extremely tiring.

And yet, if she could circulate her essence while traversing the wasteland, then she wouldn't just have a few pitiful hours at night to form her core. Instead, she could keep forming it constantly, for as long as her mental fortitude allowed it.

Rain felt a strange compulsion to laugh and cry at the same time.

'Of course… of course! Why not?'

She was already doing something unprecedented by trying to Awaken without the help of the Nightmare Spell. As far as Rain knew, no other human of the waking world had ever done that.

And yet, she didn't just have to perform that miraculous feat, but also do it while being pursued by an Awakened Tyrant and dying from physical exertion. Lost in the wild reaches of the Dream Realm with no help, hope, or support.

It wasn't fair at all.

But it also made sense, in a strange kind of way. After all, making history was not supposed to be easy.

'I can do it… I must do it. I have no choice but to do it.'

Rain gritted her teeth.

And then, ignoring her terrible fatigue and suffocating strain, she reached into her soul and tried to move her essence.

The heavy mental and spiritual burden was instantly added to the

crushing hardship of pushing her tired body forward.

As soon as she took the next step and felt the wire rope cut into her skin painfully, her concentration was destroyed, and she lost control of her essence.

Rain took a laborious breath, gripped the rope tighter, and tried again.

This time, she managed to keep hold of her essence, but lost control of her abdominal muscles, allowing them to relax. She instantly lost balance, stumbled, and sprawled in the mud.

"Ah…"

Tamar subdued voice resounded from behind, tinged with concern:

"Rani, are you alright?"

Rain exhaled slowly, then pushed herself off the ground and wiped the mud off her face.

Well, with how dirty her gloves were, she might have just added more mud to it.

"I'm... fine."

Pulling up the alloy harness, she gripped it again and pulled the stretcher forward.

She did not make the same mistake the second time.

It was terribly difficult, and ruthlessly hard. But after a while, she managed to take several steps without losing control of her essence.

Then, a dozen steps.

Then, a hundred.

And finally, Rain forced herself to keep walking and circulating her essence at the same time. Her vision had turned blurry, and her mind felt as if it would collapse from strain.

But it did not.

Her body did not crumble, either.

So, she kept walking.

After a while, her hearing seemed to have turned incredibly sharp. She heard the makeshift stretcher scraping against rocks. She also heard the melodious ringing of crystals of essence colliding with each other. She could almost hear the roar of the radiant whirlpool as it revolved within her soul.

Eventually — she did not know how much time had passed — she thought that she could feel her essence with incredible clarity, like she had never felt it before. The sensation of it flowing through her, within her, was almost physical.

And so, it was almost as if her body and soul became one, indistinguishable from each other.

When that happened, she pushed her essence harder, making it revolve even faster. The pressure at the heart of the whirlpool increased, and the speed with which the next grain was being formed increased as well.

Much more importantly…

Rain wasn't limited to meditating a few hours a day anymore. She could keep the process of core formation at all times — while she walked, while she talked, while she rested her weary body on the ground.

As long as her will held, she did not have to stop.

The question was…

What would take longer? For her will to shatter, or for her soul core to be formed?

Rain was going to find the answer, whether she wanted to or not.

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As night fell, so did she.

Rain collapsed on the ground, unmoving. This time, she remained motionless for far longer than yesterday.

It felt like her body had shut down.

She had never been so utterly beaten before, or exhausted so terribly.

And yet, she still continued to control her essence, never letting its current stop or slow down.

After a while, Tamar awkwardly crawled over to check on her. The Legacy girl helped Rain turn over, supported her to sit up, and shoved a strip of meat into her hands.

"Eat."

Rain smiled weakly and forced herself to take a bite.

The Tyrant had fallen behind in the latter half of the day. Her speed had been greater with the harness, and she had covered much more distance. It was still nowhere near enough to escape the pursuit, but at least they would survive another night.

Probably.

They even had some water left.

After quenching her thirst and consuming enough meat to refuel her depleted body, Rain sprawled on the ground and sighed.

"Ah. I'm going to be terribly skinny by the end of it."

Tamar stared at her with an incredulous expression.

"That's what you're concerned about?"

Rain considered laughing, but found the thought too tiring. In the end, she said:

"Why, of course. I want the Tyrant to be left hungry after it gobbles me up. Skin and bones, that sort of thing…"

The young Legacy remained silent for a few moments, then sighed.

"You have a very morbid sense of humor, don't you, Rani?"

Laying on the ground, Rain grinned.

"What can I say? If you live with wolves, you'll howl like a wolf. Someone has been a bad influence on me."

After a while, she added:

"...I'm sure I'm pretty delicious, though."

Tamar had her usual stoic expression on, but at that moment, it cracked a little.

Looking away, she suppressed a chuckle, and said in a serious tone:

"I'm sure you are."

As she did, Rain felt another radiant crystal being formed deep within her soul.

The melodious ringing was growing louder, and more frequent.

Chapter-1823: Mud

A desolate plain stretched as far as the eye could see under the cloudy sky. The horizon was shrouded by a rustling veil of cold rain, and the ground had turned into an endless expanse of mud.

A canyon cut the plain like a deep scar, resounding with eerie weeping sounds. It would turn into a raging river soon, but for now, the vertical slopes were drowning in nothing but darkness.

A young woman was moving across the plain, pulling a makeshift sled behind her… although, it would have been hard to recognize her as a human from first sight. Covered in mud from head to toe, she looked like a gaunt golem made from clay. The mud stuck to her skin and clothes, making the woman look like a part of the barren wasteland that had somehow come alive.

Her face and hair were covered in layers of dirt, as well. Only her dark, sunken eyes could be seen, burning with fierce determination.

…In the end, Rain had lasted more than a day. In fact, she had lasted for six, enduring the inhuman strain and crushing exertion of their desperate flight against all odds.

She had reached her breaking point a long time ago. But, somehow, she managed to keep going even after becoming broken. Later, she faced some other, much deeper limit… Rain wasn't sure what it was, and couldn't clearly remember. All she knew was that she was still standing.

That was all that mattered.

The original stretcher had long fallen apart. The enchanted cloak was fine, of course, but the wooden frame had cracked and shattered. Rain had kept repairing it as best she could, but at some point, she could only discard the broken branches and replace them.

She built the new frame from the bones of the Nightmare Creatures that had attacked them in the dead of night.

The melodious ringing of essence crystals colliding with each other in the depths of her soul was almost deafening now, filling her ears. Her vision had grown vague and narrow. Most of her consciousness was consumed by the sensation of soul essence spinning in a raging whirlpool, permeating every cell of her body. The rest was filled with exhaustion and pain.

Step. Step. Another step.

The further south they went, the more bleak the weather became. Chilling rain poured from the grey sky more and more frequently, and grew more and more forceful. She didn't mind. Not only did it mean that they would not suffer from thirst, but pulling the stretcher through the mud was easier than it would have been if the soil was dry.

Of course, it was a perilous exchange. Rain would have probably been dead if not for her military bodysuit — being wet meant losing heat, and heat was energy. With how much she was exerting herself, energy was a precious resource that she dared not waste.

Her body had already started consuming itself, so it was a dire commodity.

Tamar, meanwhile, was not faring much better.

She did not have to exhaust herself physically, and her wounds were healing. But new ones were added to the old ones after that nighttime attack. The young Legacy had lost a lot of blood, and although they slaughtered the abominations in the end, it was not without a cost.

Rain was concerned about the younger girl.

They did not have a lot of chances to get to know each other better in the past six days — most of their time was taken by the endless, exhausting march, and when they rested at night, both were too tired to talk.

And yet, Rain felt like an invisible bond had formed between them.

How could it not, after they had gone through so much hardship together? The muddy plain, the weeping sky, the burning desire to survive… no one else would know or remember these trials, but they would.

There was a sound that suddenly distracted her.

She could barely hear it behind the rustle of rain, the roar of the water rushing through the canyon, the melody of her soul essence, and the silence of her numb thoughts.

"...ni! Rani! Ra…"

She flinched and came to her senses. In the next moment, she saw several swift silhouettes rushing at them through the rain.

Nightmare Creatures.

'Curse them…'

Without wasting any time, Rain fell on the ground.

Behind her, Tamar was already sitting up on the stretcher. She was holding a bow in one hand, nocking an arrow on its string with the other.

While Rain was feverishly untangling herself from the alloy harness, the young Legacy let the arrow loose. It streaked through the pouring rain and hit one of the abominations in the shoulder. Despite her weakened state, Tamar still managed to maintain admirable accuracy — however, it wasn't quite enough. The creature stumbled and rolled on the ground, but then rose again and continued sprinting.

Although it had received a deep wound, none of its vital organs were destroyed.

'Damn it.'

There were three abominations, each the size of a wolf. From the looks of it, they were merely Awakened… in fact, the two of them had been lucky to not encounter a Fallen Nightmare Creature yet. Still, an Awakened abomination was absolutely deadly. Especially in

a situation like this one, when the initiative was on their side.

'...So tired.'

Rain remained laying on the ground for a few moments, then rose to her knees and unsheathed her hunting knife. She gripped the hilt of the enchanted dagger with her other hand and rose, holding both blades in a defensive stance.

By that time, Tamar had already sent another arrow flying, finally bringing the wounded abomination down. Her face was pale, and the ugly wound that stretched across her shoulder and chest had opened, seeping with blood. The strain of drawing a powerful enchanted bow was too much for her to endure.

And yet, she was already pulling the string for the third time.

The Nightmare Creatures were almost upon them. Both lunged forward in a flash of claws, fangs, and frenzied eyes.

Just then, Tamar's arrow hit one in the head, killing it instantly.

The other jumped on Rain. She dove under its claws and thrust both of her blades forward. The hunting knife barely penetrated the tough hide of the abomination and slid from her grasp, but the long dagger sunk into its flesh to the hilt.

The creature fell on Rain and sent her crashing to the ground. She just barely managed to push the abominable beast, sending it flying over her head. They fell simultaneously.

'It hurts.'

Rain fell on her back, but spun and rose to her knees almost immediately. Dashing toward the struggling abomination, she pinned it to the ground with the weight of her body and stabbed it repeatedly. Her strikes were aimed at all the spots where vital organs should have been.

A while later, the beast stopped moving.

Rain crawled off its corpse weakly and sprawled in the mud.

After that violent burst of strength, she felt like she would never be able to stand up.

And yet… throughout all of it, the melodious ringing never grew silent. Even while being lunged at by a snarling abomination, wrestling it to the ground, and sinking her blade into its flesh, Rain had never stopped circulating her essence.

Somewhere deep within her, another radiant grain of sand was formed.

She smiled tiredly.

'Soon… soon…'

Drops of rain were falling heavily on her burning face.

Chapter-1824: After Me Comes the Flood

The Tyrant was still behind them, its towering figure moving slowly in the distance.

Rain reminded herself that they could not waste any time. And yet, she had no strength left to rise.

However, that was alright.

She had felt the same way the previous time she fell, and the time before that, and the time before that…

Letting out a quiet groan, Rain sat up, then slowly staggered to her feet. Walking over to where she had dropped the hunting knife, she picked it up and sheathed her blades. The crude sheath she had made for the enchanted dagger was coming undone, sliced by its sharp blade… but it would hold for a day or two, which was more than she could ask for.

Finally, she looked at Tamar.

"How… how are you doing?"

The young Legacy was laying down on the stretcher, breathing heavily. Her breathing did not sound good.

"...I'm alright. I heal fast. The bleeding is already stopping."

Rain nodded.

Even if the bleeding did not stop, there was little she could do. All she could do was trust in Tamar's incredible resilience.

Walking over to where the alloy harness lay in the mud, Rain glanced

at the corpses of the three Nightmare Creatures. Usually, she would have harvested meat and soul shards from them, but the Tyrant was too close.

There was no time.

'I just need to hold on until nightfall. Then… then, I can rest.'

She put the harness on and pulled the stretcher.

She just had to keep walking.

And keep her essence flowing.

Life had been complicated, but now, it was very simple. The scope of her existence was narrowed down to these two things.

She dragged Tamar away from the dead abominations.

They continued their gruesome journey.

As Rain walked, she could feel her soul changing subtly. There were countless radiant crystals at the heart of the whirlpool now, all being pressed together by the crushing pressure.

She could feel the pressure growing.

As it did, the rain was becoming more violent, as well. It slowly grew from a constant downpour to a pelting deluge, as if the sky was slowly splitting open.

The weather was strange. Tamar had mentioned once that it did not rain that often, or that much, in the southern reaches of the Moonriver Plain… her ancestral Citadel was somewhere nearby, so she would know.

It seemed that the world was either helping them or trying to kill them. Rain wasn't sure which, and didn't care to find out.

All she cared about was making it to nightfall alive.

And in the end, she did.

However, to her despair, the long-awaited reprieve did not come.

Usually, she was able to create some distance between them and the Tyrant by the time darkness fell. The abominable giant would lumber in the distance in the first half of the day, then slowly disappear beyond the horizon in the latter part. However, this time, she could still see its silhouette, following them from far away.

Perhaps she had grown so weak that she couldn't maintain sufficient speed anymore, or perhaps the Tyrant was slowly adapting to being blind. It was even possible that its eyes were gradually regenerating… Awakened abominations possessed stunning vitality, after all, just like Awakened humans did.

What seemed impossible for a mundane person was nothing special to them.

In any case, the giant was too close.

Soon, darkness enveloped the world. The three moons and the sea of stars were hidden behind the clouds, so it was even more oppressive than before. The rain fell in a constant stream, reducing the visibility even further.

Rain lowered herself to the ground, kneeling in the mud.

"...Are we stopping?"

Tamar couldn't hide the grim feeling of dread from her voice.

Rain slowly shook her head.

"We can't stop. Not tonight."

The Tyrant was too close, so they had to keep going.

She took a deep breath, feeling cold air cut her tortured lungs.

"Summon a luminous Memory."

They had avoided using one before, afraid that light would attract uninvited guests, but there wasn't much choice now.

Soon, a wave of stark light flowed from behind her, illuminating a narrow circle around them. The streams of water falling from the sky seemed to ignite with that light, glistening like precious gems.

It was pretty.

Rain sighed.

Then, she rose from the ground and continued walking.

South, south…

How far south had they gone, already?

When would they reach their goal?

It did not matter.

Rain continued to walk, arduously pulling the heavy stretcher behind her. She continued to spin her essence and listened to the tremors running through her soul.

She had reached a state of being beyond exhausted.

And yet… the worst part was that she couldn't see the Tyrant anymore.

It could have been far away, or only a few hundred meters behind them. It could have even been reaching for them with its countless hands, already.

'I need to keep going.'

And so she did.

Slowly, all thoughts disappeared from her head.

All that was left was the ringing of her soul, which was slowly growing louder and louder.

Rain did not notice that the pelting rain was becoming heavier and heavier, as well. A powerful wind rose, sending water flying almost parallel to the ground. Soon, a blinding flash illuminated the world,

and a deafening thunderclap shook the heavens.

The rain was turning into a furious storm.

She smiled, feeling the streams of cold water wash the mud off her sunken face.

Her smile was a little scary.

Eventually, the lightning grew so frequent that there were almost no breaks between its flashes. The thunderclaps had fused into a continuous litany of deafening roars. If it had seemed as if the sky was splitting open before, then it was collapsing entirely now.

A vast and prodigious storm had descended upon the Moonriver Plain.

And yet, Rain wasn't aware.

She could only think about walking forward, one step at a time.

But then…

She couldn't walk forward anymore.

Not because her strength had abandoned her, but because there was nowhere for her to go.

Rain stopped, barely noticing that there was no ground in front of her.

There was no mud, no stone outcroppings.

Instead, she was standing in front of an abyssal drop.

She frowned.

'Have I… have I lost direction and swayed toward the canyon?'

But that was not it.

Slowly, she grew cognizant of her surroundings.

The thundering storm, the blinding flashes of lightning, the impenetrable darkness… and a deep, reverberating hum that seemed to penetrate her very bones, resounding from somewhere below.

Rain looked into the abyss and staggered.

She might have fallen over the edge if not for the harness that attached her to Tamar's stretcher.

The young Legacy called from behind, struggling to make her voice heard over the storm:

"Rani… Rani, is it…"

In front of them, the Moonriver Plain came to an end.

The great plateau ceased abruptly, creating a vast and head-spinning wall of stone that stretched from east to west, as far as the eye could see.

Countless canyons merged or opened into the vertical abyss, most of them expelling enormous jets of foaming water.

The streams of water merged and plummeted down, creating an unimaginable, endless waterfall.

It was as if the world was crying.

'...The Weeping Goddess.'

They had reached the great waterfall that served as the boundary of the Moonriver Plain.

The Lake of Tears was somewhere far below. The city governed by Clan Sorrow was situated on its shore, and their Citadel was somewhere close, cut into the cliffs.

Rain's eyes widened.

Not from joy, but from horror.

'We're… we're dead.'

Turning around, she waited for lightning to illuminate the world and saw the dreadful shape of the Tyrant.

The abomination was not too far away.

There was no time to come up with a way to descend to the bottom of the towering cliffs. There was no time to explore the edge of the plateau, searching for the Citadel of Clan Sorrow.

The goal of their ghastly journey, which had been supposed to be their salvation, was nothing but a death sentence now.

Because the Tyrant was too close, pursuing them…

And they had nowhere else to run.

Chapter-1825: Edge of the Abyss

The storm shrouded everything in impenetrable darkness. The roaring thunderclaps reverberated across the plain, and a deluge of water was falling from the sky, as if the heavenly floodgates had shattered under the immense pressure, dooming the world to be drowned.

Frequent bolts of lightning tore apart the darkness, replacing it with blinding light. And somewhere below, the tidal hum of the colossal waterfall was fusing with the raging song of the furious storm.

Rain stood at the edge of the abyss, looking at the black sky with a resentful expression.

Behind her, Tamar was looking back, at the hideous shape of the pursuing Tyrant.

There was nowhere for them to run.

"Rani! The Tyrant…"

Rain looked at the sky, and then took a deep breath.

Then, surrounded by the raging storm, she sat on the ground at the edge of the abyss. Crossing her legs, she placed her hands on her knees, and closed her eyes.

In a flash of lightning, her tranquil figure looked incredibly out of place.

She exhaled slowly.

'Focus.'

Rain concentrated on her soul. A radiant river was flowing within her, forming a furious whirlpool. At its heart, beautiful crystals of

essence were being tempered by the crushing pressure.

The melodious song of her soul was louder than the storm, and much more compelling.

She couldn't hear Tamar anymore.

'Form. Clash. Awaken.'

Nothing else mattered.

Behind her, Tamar looked at her mundane companion in despair. Noticing that Rani was sitting on the edge of the abyss, unmoving, she was stunned for a moment. Then, a look of guilt and shame twisted her beautiful face.

She assumed that the older girl had completely exhausted her strength, both physical and mental. It was already an incredibly valiant feat, to have persisted for so long without collapsing. Rani possessed enough willpower and conviction — or maybe stubbornness — to put most Awakened to shame.

But everyone had a limit.

"Rani…"

Tamar gritted her teeth.

Despite the terrible flood pouring from the shattered sky, the Tyrant never seemed to lose their scent. It moved slowly, keeping its head low to the ground. Countless hands were supporting its weight, sinking deep into the mud.

Rain was fully focused on her soul. Now that she did not have to walk or pull the heavy stretcher, the measure of control she could exert over her essence had increased. The radiant whirlpool spun even faster, and the pressure at the heart of it had increased even further.

There were countless crystals of solid essence there, by now, each no larger than a grain of sand. They collided against each other chaotically, making her entire soul tremble. That trembling used to

happen rarely, but now, there was no stop to it. It was as if Rain's soul was in the middle of an earthquake.

But it was not enough. Still, it wasn't…

'Fuse!'

Rain did not know whether her mental cry was a command, a request, or a desperate prayer. It was simply her will, expressed in a single word.

And just at that moment, either by coincidence or responding to her cry…

Two of the radiant gemstones collided. However, this time, they were not repelled by each other. Instead, both cracked, and then…

Merged.

A sense of indescribable jubilation drowned her heart.

'Finally…'

After the first pair, it was as if an invisible catalyst had been added to her soul, starting a chain reaction. More and more of the tiny essence crystals became covered by a net of fine cracks, and then seamlessly fused with each other. Then, the larger gemstones consumed the smaller ones, or merged with those of the same size.

The process was incredibly violent, resembling the catastrophic ignition of a thermonuclear bomb. The merging of the essence crystals reminded Rain of nuclear fusion… the wondrous process that kept the distant stars burning in the cold, empty sky.

And it was indeed as if a star was being born at the center of her soul.

There was blinding light produced by the fusing gemstones. There was heat, as well. The very heart of her soul had turned into an incandescent, luminous sea, and she couldn't sense individual crystals anymore.

The whirlpool of essence was being slowly absorbed into that radiant sea.

'...The soul core is forming.'

Indeed, hidden in the sea of light, a soul core was being built within her soul. And that nascent core… was like a bridge between her soul and her flesh.

Rain felt as though a miniature star was burning in the center of her chest: waves of heat were radiating from it, slowly reaching her empty stomach and lacerated shoulders, then her tortured arms and legs, then her aching hands and feet.

Under that heat, her bones, muscles, organs and blood vessels were being rebuilt and revitalized. She was being reborn. She was becoming stronger, faster, healthier…

It was euphoric.

With each second, her transformation was becoming more profound.

After some time had passed, the star burning in her chest finally cooled down. The luminous sea dimmed, and from it…

A radiant sphere was revealed, shining beautifully upon Rain's soul.

The heat was replaced with a soothing coldness. That coldness washed over her body, taking away all the aches and discomforts that had been accumulated there over the past six days. Then it moved up, reaching her mind and soothing it.

She slowly opened her eyes.

'Is this… what it means to be Awakened?'

Rain felt… powerful. Her body was suffused with ferocious strength, startling endurance, and boundless vitality. Her senses were sharper. Even her mind seemed to have become more profound, somehow.

Soul essence flowed freely through her body, seeping into her bones and muscles. It felt richer and more responsive… almost palpable.

The soul core was at the heart of it all, serving as the bridge between tangible and intangible.

A tired smile appeared on Rain's face.

'I did it!'

Lost in the depths of a furious storm, sitting on the edge of a bottomless abyss, surrounded by darkness, and pursued by a harrowing abomination…

The first human of the waking world had just Awakened without taking upon the curse of the Nightmare Spell.

Chapter-1826: Coming Storm

While Rain was in the middle of her Awakening, Tamar was struggling not to drown. Streams of water were pouring from the sky, mixing with mud… laying powerlessly on the stretcher, she felt weak and spent.

The situation seemed to be hopeless.

Not only would she die, but Rani, who had refused to abandon her and strived so stubbornly to save them, would be killed, too.

Looking at the furious black sky, Tamar wanted to give up.

But she couldn't.

"Ah…"

A long sigh escaped from her lips.

Then, a whirlwind of sparks surrounded her, forming into a beautiful spear.

Tamar gritted her teeth, then rose to her feet, using the spear as a crutch.

Immediately, severe pain pierced her fragile legs.

It had been six or seven days since they were broken. The bones had healed, somewhat, but even for an Awakened, that was not nearly enough time to recover. She was probably undoing all that healing… but, still.

Tamar refused to die lying down.

Better yet, she didn't want to die at all. She was also indignant at the thought of Rani dying because of her.

So, she had a hard decision to make.

'I have to summon the Echo.'

The monstrous wolf was protecting the survey team, and she was unwilling to compromise their safety. However, at this point, there was no sense in keeping the Echo with them.

That was because it would disappear if Tamar died, leaving the survey team similarly defenseless.

The problem was…

That there was no way to guarantee that summoning the Echo would save them. It was an Ascended Monster — a protector gifted to her by her clan. An Ascended Monster was a powerful creature, but it was not a given that it would be able to defeat an Awakened Tyrant.

Especially this Tyrant in particular, who seemed both ancient and exceedingly powerful.

The wolf wouldn't be able to carry them away, either, because the Tyrant was too close, and the Echo would instantly attract its attention.

So… in order to increase their chances, Tamar would have to assist the Echo in fighting the Tyrant herself. She could still draw her bow, even if doing so would make her wounds open.

'I'll… I'll summon it, then.'

And yet, she hesitated.

Watching the Tyrant slowly draw closer, Tamar waited for something. Maybe something would happen… some miracle that would lead the hideous giant away. Maybe a bolt of lightning would descend from the sky and burn it.

Maybe she wouldn't need to fail her friends and mission, after all.

But nothing happened.

The Tyrant was already too close. It was still following their scent. A miracle did not descend, and their fates were still sealed.

Tamar took a deep breath and prepared to dismiss the Echo.

…But just before she did, a hand suddenly landed on her shoulder.

Tamar flinched and looked back.

Rani was standing there, looking at her calmly. Constant flashes of lightning were reflecting in her striking black eyes, making it seem as though they were illuminated by inner light.

The mundane girl… looked different, somehow.

Tamar couldn't tell what about her had changed, exactly, in the lightning-infused darkness.

Rani smiled.

"It's alright. I'll take care of it now."

She paused for a moment, and then added calmly:

"Summon that sword of yours."

Tamar looked at her in confusion, failing to understand what was happening. Her reason told her that Rani must have lost her mind, and that there was no point in listening to her ramblings.

But, somehow, Tamar did not believe it. She felt a strange compulsion to be unreasonable and believe in her companion.

And, after a long pause… she did.

Instead of dismissing the Echo and summoning it here, she summoned her brutish zweihander and offered it to Rani.

Rani took it with a thankful nod.

She could barely lift it before. But now, she was holding it easily, as if her strength was suddenly in no way inferior to Tamar's own.

Patting Tamar on the shoulder reassuringly, Rani turned and walked away from the edge.

She was heading toward the approaching Tyrant.

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Rain walked through the storm, carrying the heavy greatsword easily. Sadly, she had not had a lot of time to bask in the ecstasy of having Awakened — they were still in mortal danger. The Tyrant was still drawing closer.

And she had to kill it.

...Which was a tall task.

Even now that Rain was an Awakened, the Tyrant posed a lethal threat to her. After all, most Awakened did not fight such powerful creatures alone… her case was especially precarious, because she was a singular existence.

Not only had she Awakened mere minutes ago, but she also did not possess an Aspect yet. Unlike the carriers of the Nightmare Spell, those who Awakened naturally, like her, had to spend time slowly discovering their Aspect and Flaw.

Before that happened, she would not have powerful Aspect Abilities to assist her in battle.

All she had was her enhanced physical prowess, cunning, and Tamar's sword.

Now, she would see if that was enough.

Reaching a certain point, directly in the path of the approaching Tyrant, Rain lowered the zweihander to the ground, assumed a stance… and froze.

She had thought a lot about how to kill that damned Tyrant.

Actually, it wasn't that hard to achieve.

The creature did not possess an impenetrable carapace or thick fur to stop her blade. Its defense was mostly in the form of overwhelming offense — the forest of arms were its minions, so damaging or destroying them would not harm the abomination. One had to reach its body to deliver a fatal wound, but to do that, they had to fight their way through the avalanche of monstrous hands.

Which was close to impossible for someone like her.

However…

The Tyrant was blind now.

So, that was what Rain decided to gamble her life on.

Standing motionlessly in the path of the abomination, she did not make a single sound. In fact, she even held her breath and forced her heartbeat to slow down — in the middle of the roaring storm, the creature would not hear it.

At least that was Rain's hope.

As she watched the hideous Nightmare Creature approach, all her instincts were screaming for her to turn away and run. However, she did not move at all.

Soon, the Tyrant drew so close that she could discern every ghastly detail of its gaunt body, flooded by the light of the flashing bolts of lightning.

The creature was coming right at her.

…But it was not aware that its prey was so close, yet.

Soon, a monstrous hand landed in the mud directly to Rain's right.

Then, another landed in the mud to her left.

The abomination dragged itself closer.

Its appalling, oversized head was now almost above her, the enormous maw close enough to swallow her whole in an instant.

Rain smiled darkly.

'Got you.'

Instead of fighting her way through the forest of hands, she had allowed the blind Tyrant to bring itself to her.

She finally moved.

As soon as she did, the Tyrant's head jerked, turning toward her.

But it was already too late.

The zweihander exploded forward, slicing through the mud and rising in an upward arc. Rain pulled with one hand and pushed with the other, using its long handle as a lever. Her Awakened strength was great enough to make the blade of the greatsword turn into a blur.

A split second later…

The zweihander struck the Tyrant's chin. Its sharp blade carried enough force and momentum to slice its jaw in half, sever its tongue, break through the fragile bones of the nasal cavity, cut cleanly through its brain, and finally escape from its forehead.

In an instant, the abomination's head was split in two halves.

A moment later, Rain was already jumping back. She easily leaped a dozen meters back, then slid in the mud the same distance.

By then, countless hands were already pummeling the spot where she had stood. If she had been even a little bit slower, she would have been crushed.

But it did not matter.

Because those hands were nothing but minions.

The Tyrant itself… was dead.

Its body swayed heavily, and then collapsed into the mud, a river of

blood spilling from its mangled head.

Just like that, the pursuit was over.

Chapter-1827: Cleansing

Hidden in the shadows, Sunny let out a secretive sigh of relief.

The past week had been a terrible ordeal for Rain… but it had not been easy for him, either.

A long time ago, Sunny had told Rain that he could teach her how to wield a sword, how to traverse the Dream Realm, and how to kill her enemies… but he could not teach her how to be strong. The world was a cold and ruthless place, and his little sister was much too soft to endure its cruelty.

Even now, all these years later, she retained that softness. She had learned how to wield weapons, survive in the wild, and hunt down abominations, but her nature was still the same. Rain had never suffered heartbreaking loss, had never felt the lightless depths of true despair, and had never faced the darkest sides of humanity.

Despite her cool appearance and tough reputation, at her core, she was still the same kind and sweet girl.

Which was a solace to Sunny. He never wanted her to lose that part of herself.

And yet, he couldn't coddle her too much, either. It would only do Rain harm if she learned to rely on him too much.

So, he had laboriously created the persona of Shadow, her mercurial teacher — who was both friendly and caring, but also a little sinister and not completely reliable.

That way, she could still feel a false sense of danger while being protected by him from the shadows, and grow stronger for it.

It would have been fine to let Rain Awaken at her own pace, but the

war was too close. So, Sunny had used the chance encounter with the Awakened Tyrant to design a trial for her.

His own version of the First Nightmare.

The irony of how similar it was to his personal First Nightmare had not escaped him. A punishing escape through the wild reaches of the Dream Realm, in the company of an Awakened swordsman, pursued by a blind Tyrant…

Of course, there were differences, as well.

And although Rain had never been in real danger due to him observing her from the shadows, she definitely had not felt that way.

Her struggle had been real, her suffering had been real, and her eventual triumph was real.

Sunny, meanwhile, had not struggled himself — all he had done was eliminate any Fallen abominations that could have stumbled onto the two escaping girls and keep an eye on the survey team to make sure that they made it back to the main camp alright.

And yet, he felt completely exhausted.

Watching Rain suffer was not easy for him. He wouldn't go as far as to say that it had been harder than it had been for Rain, but still.

Sunny felt like his heart was bleeding.

And that was saying much, considering how difficult it was for him to bleed!

Similarly, while Rain felt incredible joy and pride at being able to Awaken, his heart was full of emotion, as well.

However, for Sunny… he felt even more.

That was because he could see more, and understood more.

Rain had a deep connection to her soul, for a mundane person, and could control her essence well. But Sunny perceived it on a much

deeper level.

That was why he could see a tiny bead of hideous darkness that nestled in his sister's soul. A seed of Corruption… the Nightmare Seed. Every mundane person who had entered the Dream Realm carried one within them, just like those infected by the Nightmare Spell in the waking world did.

Although… Sunny was not entirely sure which came first — the Seed of Nightmare or the infection. Perhaps it was precisely because some people carried hideous darkness within their souls that the Spell chose them.

In any case, the Seed in Rain's soul had not grown in the past four years, and would not bloom into a Category One Nightmare Gate unless certain conditions were met. That was because it was small and miniscule enough to be suppressed by the authority of Queen Song.

As long as Rain remained in the Song Domain, her First Nightmare would never come.

But it would also make her an eternal hostage of a Domain unless she accepted the Spell and challenged the Nightmare.

While the storm was raging and Rain was going through the final stage of her Awakening, Sunny observed her soul in somber silence.

The numerous sparks of light — the crystals of solidified essence — fused under the pressure. A luminous sea ignited at the depths of Rain's soul. Forged in the heat of that sea, her soul core slowly came to shape.

And at the same time, unnoticed…

The bead of darkness dissolved in the light, destroyed by it.

Sunny had seen a Seed of Corruption bloom in the soul of a Sleeper once. Watching the opposite process take place was both poignant and miraculous.

'Is that the purpose of the First Nightmare? To push the infected into

Awakening, and thus destroy the Seed, preventing Corruption from blooming?'

Awakening was the first step toward divinity, after all, and divinity was in direct opposition to Corruption. So, it only made sense that coming closer to divinity would render one immune to the weaker manifestation of its enemy.

That was the second way Sunny knew of for a soul to be cleansed of Corruption.

The first way was known to everyone, but very few ever considered it as such.

It was death.

Awakened were used to collecting soul shards from the Nightmare Creatures, but they rarely questioned why was it that the remnant fragments of corrupted souls were pure and untainted.

What happened at the moment of death that purified them?

Or was it death itself that eliminated the hideous darkness?

Now that Sunny knew more about the world, the Void, and the origin of death, he understood that death was a weapon to destroy Corruption.

And that was what it did.

He observed the Tyrant's tainted soul collapse and be cleansed, as well. The moment the abomination lost its life, the vile darkness shrouding its soul withered and died.

In the end, only five radiant shards were left.

So, Sunny let out a relieved sigh.

Finally, the ordeal was over.

Rain's grisly trial was finished, and the broader threat to her life was not as pressing anymore, either.

Now that her soul had been cleansed, Sunny would be able to take her out of the Song Domain. He had many more options now.

Of course… it wasn't certain that she would want to leave.

Remaining in the shadows, Sunny glanced at her.

At the moment, Rain was stumbling back to where Tamar was leaning on her spear with a pained expression on her face.

He followed stealthily.

'This next part… is going to be tricky.'

Chapter-1828: Lost and Found

Rain made her way back to where Tamar was leaning on the spear, put the sword down, and sprawled tiredly in the mud.

Now that the Tyrant was dead, the rush of power she had felt because of the Awakening receded. Her body might have been tempered and reforged, but it was still depleted and weary. Her mind, too… she was dead tired.

Some distance away, the abomination's corpse was laying on the ground like a small hill of flesh. The creature was dead, but its minions weren't — the monstrous hands were still moving, searching for the killer in blind fury. Luckily, they remained attached to the Tyrant's corpse, so their reach was limited. Until the corpse decomposed and fell apart, nothing would reach Rain and Tamar.

The movements of the terrible hands were a little panicked.

Looking at the sky, Rain let out a long sigh.

The storm was slowly dissipating. The wind had already grown weaker, and the rain was not as heavy anymore. The lightning did not strike as often. The roaring thunderclaps were not as loud, as if growing distant.

She could even see gaps in the veil of dark storm clouds.

Unexpectedly, rays of pale sunlight were pouring from through the gaps.

Which meant that it was the seventh day of their journey.

Rain stared at the rays of sunshine with displeasure.

'How annoying.'

She had hoped that it was still the sixth night, just to avoid the Nightmare Spell's favorite number. Rain had a mild aversion to the number seven, purely out of obstinance.

Tamar finally let go of her spear and fell back on her stretcher. The younger girl looked at her for a long time, her eyes full of questions.

But in the end, her exhaustion won, and she simply closed them.

Not long after, both Rain and Tamar were asleep, laying next to each other in the mud.

This was the first time in a long while they slept peacefully.

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By the time Rain woke up, the sky had cleared. Strangely enough, she didn't feel groggy or exhausted. Her body did not ache all over, either. Instead, it was brimming with energy and vitality.

The low hum of the Weeping Goddess enveloped the world like a lullaby.

She stared at the clear sky for a few moments in confusion.

'Oh. Right. I'm an Awakened now.'

Sitting up, Rain glanced in the direction of the dead Tyrant. The forest of arms was still moving, but none of them had escaped the corpse, yet. That was a relief.

Looking away, she raised her own hands and studied them.

Her skin had become smooth like silk. Her nails were like jade.

Turning her hands, she stared at her palms intently.

Her calluses were gone.

'Huh.'

Rain blinked a couple of times.

Her hands looked soft and delicate, as if she had never done any hard labor at all.

It was a bit stupid, but she couldn't help letting a small smile creep up on her face.

'Wait a minute…'

Rain pulled off her dirty, tattered shirt and unclasped the military bodysuit. Peeling it off to reveal her fair torso, she opened her eyes wide.

The mark left by the blow that the Huntsman had dealt her was gone. A few other scars she had collected in the last few years were nowhere to be seen, either. Her skin was supple and unblemished, nearly flawless.

'Wow. Ah!'

While Rain was delighting in the sight of her ladylike body, a hoarse voice resounded from behind her:

"...What are you doing?"

She flinched and hurriedly pulled the bodysuit close, embarrassed at being caught doing something so unserious.

Turning around, she saw Tamar looking at her with a complicated expression.

'Right.'

Rain smiled sheepishly.

"N—nothing. I was just… good morning, Tamar."

The young Legacy remained silent for a while, maintaining her usual stern frown. She glanced at the sky, which was already being painted golden and scarlet by the setting sun, but did not comment on how wrong Rain's greeting was.

Eventually, she opened her mouth and asked hesitantly:

"Have you been… an Awakened all along, Rani?"

Now that the deed had been done, Rain honestly wasn't sure how to deal with the situation. There had been no choice but to act when the Tyrant was about to catch them… but how was she supposed to explain its death to the young Legacy?

She wasn't even done processing what had happened herself.

Rain met Tamar's gaze and shook her head slowly.

"I think you know that I wasn't. If I was, I wouldn't have put myself through all that torment."

There was hesitation in the younger girl's eyes. She knew that Rain could not have been an Awakened… and yet, there was no other logical explanation. Reality and reason were clashing in her mind, leaving her in a state of loss and confusion.

After a while, she said stiffly:

"Unless you have some kind of powerful Flaw that limits when and how you can express your power… that is possible…"

Rain wavered for a while, then sighed.

"No. I have no such Flaw. I wasn't hiding my Rank from anyone."

Tamar gritted her teeth.

"Then how were you able to wield my sword? How were you able to slay the Tyrant? It doesn't make any sense. It's impossible for a mundane person to do!"

Rain scratched the back of her head, remained silent for a few moments, and then shrugged.

"You are right. A mundane person would not have been able to wield your sword… well, maybe some huge guy…"

Tamar took a deep breath.

"Then how?"

Rain looked at her and smiled easily.

"Isn't it obvious? When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth. So… I wasn't Awakened before, but I am now."

She raised an arm and flexed her muscles.

"It really feels amazing, by the way!"

The young Legacy stared at her with a stunned expression.

"No… you couldn't have conquered the First Nightmare, there was no time… you couldn't have even challenged it within the Queen's Domain…"

Rain nodded.

"You are right. I did not conquer the First Nightmare."

Tamar took a deep breath.

"How could you Awaken, then?"

Now was probably the last chance for Rain to keep her mouth shut.

But really… did she have to?

She had a vague hope that Tamar would not betray her. More than that, she did not think that keeping her achievement secret was the right thing to do.

Since Rain had found a way to Awaken without becoming a carrier of the Nightmare Spell, others would be able to follow her example, as well — perhaps not many, but some.

Which meant that fewer children would have to die while challenging the Nightmare. Like her older brother had.

Many would still choose to accept the Spell, without a doubt, due to all the boons it offered. But at least they would have a choice.

Conversely…

If she kept her accomplishment hidden, then in the future, the deaths of every unwilling Sleeper would indirectly be her fault.

Rain wasn't sure how or when she wanted to share her knowledge , but she knew that it had to be shared.

So, she gathered her courage and said:

"How did the ancient people of the Dream Realm Awaken? You should know that there was no Nightmare Spell back then."

Tamar's eyes widened slowly. She reeled back, mumbling softly:

"Before… before the Nightmare Spell… impossible… the knowledge has been lost…"

Rain smiled.

"Yes, the knowledge has been lost. But now, it has been found. I found it."

'With a lot of help from my teacher…'

Chapter-1829: A New Way

Before the sun set, the minions of the dead Tyrant accepted the death of their ruler. Rain watched with a dark expression as the countless hands stopped moving for a while, and then started to claw at the flesh of the dead abomination.

The corpse was going to come undone much sooner than she had expected, allowing the monstrous hands to prowl freely.

She wanted to be as far away from the swarm of them as possible when that happened.

Soon, she was pulling Tamar's stretcher through the mud once again. It had been torturously hard and exhausting before… but now, Rain did not feel any strain at all. It was so easy that the bitterness of her past efforts seemed like a joke.

She was slowly coming to terms with the fact that she had become an Awakened, smiling brightly from time to time.

Tamar was slowly coming to terms with it, too.

The young Legacy spoke from the stretcher:

"But… how, exactly, did you do it?"

Rain considered if she should break into a sprint, but then decided against it.

"Well. It is hard to explain with words… the first thing you should know is that natural Awakening works in reversed order from the one induced by the Spell. You must learn how to sense and control your essence first, and form the soul core later."

She remembered her early days in Ravenheart. Back then, she had

barely known her teacher…

"Your essence has to Awaken first. There are a few ways to make that happen, but the only one I know of is to absorb the essence of Awakened creatures."

Tamar shifted quietly on the stretcher.

"Soul shards used to be extremely precious in the waking world, so very few mundanes ever had a chance to acquire many of them before. The situation is even more dire now… with how many new Awakened and Masters are out there, everyone is striving to saturate their cores."

She paused for a moment, and then added scornfully:

"You must be very rich, Rani, to have acquired so many. For a simple porter."

Rain grinned.

"Who? Me? No, I'm a bit poor… actually, I never once managed to buy a soul shard. I just went out there and hunted down Nightmare Creatures, one at a time. Mostly Dormant, and a few Awakened."

The young Legacy let out a long, exasperated sigh.

"You crazy mundane girl..."

Rain chuckled.

"Well, anyway. Then, you have to learn how to sense and control your essence. That part is the hardest. I don't really know how to describe it, since there are no words in human language to do something like that. Plus… it's a bit of an impossible task, to begin with. How do you describe the sense of balance?

How do you describe colors to a blind person? It's like that. Well, you should know — I am sure you, Awakened, struggle all the time to explain various things to mundane people. I mean… we, Awakened."

She paused for a few moments, then continued calmly:

"The last part is to form the soul core. That is what I have been doing ever since we've met. The process is rather simple, if a bit tedious. You just need to control your essence and make it flow in a circle, like a whirlpool. If you do it long enough and well enough, your essence will start to solidify. And then, at some point, a chain reaction will start, birthing the core.

That is how you become Awakened, and that is what happened to me yesterday."

Tamar remained silent for a while.

Eventually, she asked:

"That doesn't really make sense. You couldn't have learned all of this on your own… someone extraordinary must have guided you. But that is not even the issue. Alright, I'll accept that you are a mundane girl who habitually hunts down Nightmare Creatures. That much is theoretically possible, at least.

But it would also mean that you should have stayed comfortably in a well-defended city during the last and most sensitive part of your Awakening. There was no reason for you to work as a laborer in a road construction crew… even without taking into account that such a job would slow down the process of refining a soul core, it is simply beneath someone of your ability."

Rain coughed awkwardly.

Now that she had decided to share the truth with Tamar… how much, exactly, was she supposed to share?

She couldn't reveal the identity of her teacher, because that was not her secret to share.

As for the rest…

She hesitated for a moment.

"To tell you the truth, I got myself into some trouble in Ravenheart. So, I was advised to disappear from the city for a while."

Tamar scoffed.

"I'm not surprised."

She remained silent for a while, then asked in a serious tone:

"One thing that I can't understand, Rani… is why you have decided to share your secret with me."

Rain stopped and turned around, looking at the young Legacy with a hint of dark amusement in her eyes.

"Well, the cat was out of the bag after I killed that Tyrant. So, I had two choices… either tell you the truth or toss you over the edge of the waterfall. Although... I might still choose the latter..."

She stared at Tamar for a moment, then turned around and exploded with laughter.

"Gods, the expression on your face… relax, it was a joke. Plus, why would I keep it a secret? I want as many people as possible to know. That way, fewer kids will be dying in the First Nightmare. Fewer of them will be sent into a literal Death Zone on the winter solstice like you were, too…"

Rain couldn't help but be giddy. The intoxicating feeling of strength and potency permeating her body, the pride and relief of having finally accomplished the goal she had been pursuing for so many years, the promise of a gentler future that she could potentially help usher in…

It was enough to make her head spin.

While she was basking in joy, Tamar's cold voice resounded from behind:

"Rani… you are a bit naive, aren't you?"

Rain glanced at her in confusion.

"What's that about?"

Laying on the stretcher, the young Legacy looked at the sky tiredly and let out a long sigh.

"You absolutely cannot tell anyone about how you Awakened. At least not while you are so weak and lack protection. If you knew what's good for you, you really should have tossed me over the edge of the waterfall."

Rain blinked a couple of times.

"What? Why?"

The younger girl shifted and looked up at her, her gaze somber.

"Just think about it. The entire power hierarchy of our world is built around the Nightmare Spell. The entire economy too, more or less. Those who wield power can do so because they control the resources people need to survive. Awakened warriors are one such resource… perhaps the most important one. Now, you possess something that can render all that authority meaningless.

What do you think will happen to you when those in power learn about your existence?"

Chapter-1830: Resistance to Change

Rain stopped, feeling her sense of joy dim a little.

A perplexed smile appeared on her face.

She wasn't a fool, so she had considered these things, as well. But didn't the importance of her discovery far outweigh such details?

"But it can save countless lives."

Tamar looked away and shrugged.

"Can it? Maybe in the short term… but what will happen when these new and untested Awakened have to face the horrors of the Dream Realm? What can cowards who refused to face even the First Nightmare do? Surely, they will buckle and break, leaving humanity defenseless. In that sense, what you offer is poison, not salvation."

She sighed.

"That is not my opinion, by the way. That is just one example of what others can say… will say… to justify harming you and suppressing your discovery. They might not even do it out of malice, but out of sincere belief. Because what you offer does not just attack their authority, but also their identity. That, as well, is built around the Nightmare Spell for many."

Rain dropped the harness into the mud.

"You can't be serious."

Her voice was calm, but her eyes weren't.

Because… she could easily imagine a world where Tamar was right.

Take the two Domains, for example. On the surface, the royal clans were benefactors to those hundreds of millions of mundane people who now lived in the Dream Realm.

But if one looked at it differently, the citizens of the Domains were hostage to the royal clans. They could only be safe if their Sovereign protected them, and could only really attempt the First Nightmare — and thus step on the path to greater power — if the Sovereign or one of the Sovereign's vassals allowed them to.

In the future, when more and more people of the waking world settled in the Dream Realm, that would become the cornerstone of the authority of the royal clans.

Would they be willing to share that authority?

And then, there were the Legacy clans below the two royal houses, whose culture and identity were irrevocably connected to the dreadful challenges of the Nightmare Spell. They were already prohibiting their scions from saving themselves from the trial of the winter solstice by entering the Dream Realm in advance, purely out of belief that warriors had to be forged in fire.

Would they accept Awakened who had not faced the First Nightmare? Or would they find the very concept offensive?

The consequences of Rain's achievement went far deeper than she had considered.

Tamar sighed.

"I am deadly serious, Rani. You… should speak to the extraordinary person who guided you to Awakening, at least, before making any decisions. They had to have been more aware of the repercussions than you are. Be mindful, though. Make sure that they have your best interest in heart before listening to what they have to say."

She paused for a moment, and then added in a subdued tone:

"Until you do, no one must know that you are not a carrier of the Nightmare Spell. We… we'll tell them that we had no choice but to cross the realm boundary and leave the Song Domain while escaping

from the Tyrant, and that you had your First Nightmare as a result. That will work as a temporary measure, at least."

Rain looked at her soberly.

Tamar was young… but she was a member of a Legacy clan, as well. She served the Queen as a vassal.

So, she was the exact type of person she had warned Rain against.

'Can I trust her?'

After what they had experienced together, Rain wanted to believe that she could. But in a sense, covering the truth would mean betraying the trust of Tamar's clan and Queen Song.

Would she really do that?

Rain sighed.

"One thing I don't understand, Lady Tamar… is why are you willing to hide this secret for me."

The young Legacy looked at her from the muddy stretcher. Her face was pale and stern… which was a bit of a comical look for such a young woman.

After a while, she looked away, remained silent for a moment, and said stiffly:

"Well, aren't you a member of my survey team? I am responsible for your well-being… as a superior. So… if something happens to you, a stain would be left on my reputation. And I value my reputation very much."

Rain stared at her silently, keeping a straight face.

'...Adorable!'

By that time, the night had already fallen, and the three moons were high in the sky. So, she couldn't see Tamar's expression very well.

She did see something else, however.

With a sigh, Rain unsheathed her hunting knife. Moonlight glistened on the sharp blade as she bent down.

Tamar seemed to flinch when she saw the knife.

"W—what are you doing?"

Rain cut the harness, separating it from the stretcher, and looked at the young Legacy with a neutral expression.

"I'm sorry, Lady Tamar. I'm afraid you'll have to go over the edge, after all."

Tamar's eyes widened.

"W—what?"

Rain stared at her for a few moments, then laughed and pointed in the direction of the edge.

"You might not see it from the ground, but actually…"

Out there in the darkness, far below, a scattering of lights was shining faintly through the water vapor.

It was the city built by Tamar's clan on the shores of the Lake of Tears.

Rain stood up and started dismantling the harness.

"The plan was to reach your clan's Citadel, but I don't really know how to cross all the canyons that stand in our way. It would be much easier to climb down from the plateau and reach the city. So… summon the brightest luminous Memory you have. We're going down."

Tamar was looking up at her with a frozen expression.

After a while, she scowled in outrage.

"Rani, y—you! Was that supposed to be funny?!"

Rain shrugged.

"I don't know. I thought it was pretty funny…"

Soon, they left the stretcher behind. Tamar was strapped to Rain's back with the rearranged harness, holding onto her shoulders with trembling hands. Before, Rain would have never dared to climb a slick, sheer slope while carrying such a heavy burden — but now that she was an Awakened, nothing seemed impossible for her anymore.

With the bright light of the luminous Memory illuminating the vertical surface of the weathered stone, she carefully started the descent. Her physical strength seemed inexhaustible, so all she had to do was pay attention and keep in mind how far from the wall her center of gravity was.

That said, the Moonriver plateau was terribly high, so reaching the Lake of Tears was taking an eternity. The Weeping Goddess flowed down on both sides of them, but the stretch of the slope Rain had chosen was relatively dry.

At some point, she sensed Tamar's tension and started talking to calm the younger girl down.

Rain talked about all the things she was looking forward to after Awakening.

Like not having to do laundry or carry a heavy backpack while climbing mountains...

Mainly these two things.

And having soft hands.

"That is what you were worried about?"

Tamar's voice sounded incredulous.

Rain grinned.

"Listen, Princess Tamar… you might not know it, but humble laborers like me take skincare very seriously."

The young Legacy remained silent for a while, then sighed in embarrassment.

"No, actually… I get it. Girls from Legacy clans all secretly look forward to becoming Awakened. We train really hard, you know, so by sixteen, your hands are a nightmare in and of itself…"

Rain laughed.

It was already dawn by the time they reached the water.

Rain had been worried that she would have to swim to shore, but there was no need.

Tamar's luminous Memory was very visible in the dark night, so the inhabitants of the city had long noticed a strange spark slowly crawling down the sheer cliffs.

So, there were boats waiting in a semicircle around the base of the cliffs, with armed Awakened on them.

Now, their dreadful journey was truly over.

Chapter-1831: Abstract Concept

Dressed in a comfortable night-gown, Rain was sitting on a bed. The bed was wide and soft. The sheets were immaculately clean and crisp… a far cry from the cold cradle of mud she had been sleeping on for many days.

It was also much nicer than her own bed in Ravenheart, so... she had nothing to complain about.

The room itself was spacious, but austere. The Citadel of Clan Sorrow was cut into the cliffside, so the walls surrounding her were that of rough stone. The furniture, however, was quite elegant and beautifully made.

There was a single arched window in the room, opening to the pale lilac expanse of the evening sky. The roaring of the Weeping Goddess seemed quiet here, somehow, but also constant, like a persistent hum.

The air was fresh and smelled of water.

The peaceful, but uniquely austere mood of the somber Citadel helped Rain imagine easily where Tamar's overly serious demeanor had come from.

She sighed.

Things had happened fast after the two of them reached the Lake of Tears. First, Rain and Tamar were brought to the city built on its shore — it was much smaller than Ravenheart, but still lively.

The architecture style was distinctly different, as well, favoring flat roofs that served as gardens — as opposed to the capital, where most roofs were slanted and covered by tiles to avoid snow and ash accumulating on them.

They did not spend much time in the city, though. The Saint of Sorrow was currently away, but Tamar's mother was there. After receiving news of her daughter showing up severely wounded, she immediately sent retainers to retrieve her.

Rain and Tamar were taken to the Citadel, which was cut directly into the vertical side of the great waterfall and oversaw the city from high above. Tamar was treated by an Ascended healer. Rain, meanwhile, was welcomed as a guest of Clan Sorrow.

She met the matriarch of the clan, as well as a few elders. Everyone had treated her graciously — from the Awakened retainers and mundane citizens to the members of the direct family. Tamar had briefly shared the story of how the two of them had ended up in such a sorry state, including the fake version of Rain's Awakening.

Everything seemed fine.

And yet, Rain was in a heavy mood.

That was because she had heard a lot, and inferred even more, from the conversations with the locals.

The war... seemed imminent.

Some of the people she had talked to were aware of it, while some were not. Nevertheless, everyone was alarmed and uneasy, as if there was invisible tension permeating the air.

Many things had happened after the survey team left the construction camp and lost contact with the rest of humanity.

The conflict between the two Great Clans had grown much more dire. Valor continued to demand that Silent Stalker and Master Dar of Maharana Clan were handed over, and Song continued to refuse. There were all kinds of unrest on the streets of Bastion and Ravenheart… NQSC, even.

There had been protests and violent clashes between the followers of the opposing Domains. A large crowd was chanting threateningly in front of Clan Song's compound in the waking world. Someone had tossed makeshift incendiaries at the fortress walls surrounding the

location of the King's Dream Gate in the Northern Quadrant. A few young Legacies had already fought openly, devastating a public venue.

They were arrested by the agents of the government, but the government itself was behaving strangely, as if frozen by fear, indecision, and internal conflict.

And those were only the outward signs.

The more dire omen was how deserted the Citadel of Clan Sorrow seemed. There were Awakened warriors, but too few of them. There were members of the direct family, but only the less powerful ones.

Which told Rain one thing.

The Queen was secretly mobilizing her forces.

The road Rain had helped build was almost complete, and soon, legions of the Song Domain would march on it, heading to Godgrave.

The war, which was an abstract concept before, was almost palpable now.

It was much sooner than she had expected.

And so, Rain was sitting quietly on the bed, watching as the sky turned dark beyond the window.

Finally, when all sunlight was gone and deep shadows devoured the room, a familiar presence emerged from them.

Her teacher leaned on a wall and applauded quietly. His smile was as carefree as it had always been.

"Congratulations! You are an Awakened now."

Rain looked at his dark silhouette sternly.

"...Where the hell have you been?"

He gave her a vague shrug.

"Oh, you know. Here and there. Hiding in the shadows, taking a beach vacation, sitting idly on my dark throne. Why? Didn't you do well without me?"

Rain lingered for a few moments, then let out a heavy sigh.

"I wouldn't call it "well", exactly… but, sure. Actually, I did fine."

He grinned.

"Fine? You are the first human of your world to have Awakened without that pesky thing… what do you call it? Oh, the Nightmare Spell. Great job, Rain! You really made me proud."

She silently extended her hand and opened her palm.

"Give it, then."

He raised an eyebrow… or at least she thought he did, since she couldn't see his face clearly.

"What?"

Rain frowned.

"My Memory! You promised me a Memory after I killed the Huntsman."

Her teacher laughed quietly.

"Right. Don't worry, I will. I'll even throw in one more for that Awakened Tyrant. And a third one as a free bonus, for a return customer."

He hesitated for a moment, and then added more sincerely:

"But really, good job. Awakening, killing the Tyrant… and not leaving that girl to die, too. I'm not sure that I would have done the same as a Sleeper."

Rain looked away, feeling a little embarrassed.

"...Thank you. Anyway, I was never really a Sleeper. That would have

been embarrassing — I'm way too old to be one…"

After that, neither of them spoke for a while.

Eventually, Rain asked:

"So, what now?"

Chapter-1832: The Other Side

Her teacher sighed.

"That is up to you. Now that you have Awakened, we have more options. You are not a prisoner of the Song Domain anymore… so, if you want, I can take you to safety, to wait out this entire mess."

She faced him, not saying anything.

He chuckled.

"What? I have nice places to take my student to as well, you know."

Rain smiled faintly.

"Says the man who has lived in my shadow for four years."

The joke was just like countless others she had told in the past, but today, it did not land. She didn't feel it.

Rain shook her head.

"You know I wanted to Awaken because I wanted to be strong. Have I become strong to do nothing, then? Running away and hiding in a safe place sure sounds nice, on the surface. But do you really think that I would want to?"

Her teacher sighed.

"No, not really."

He hesitated.

"So what do you want to do?"

Rain remained silent for a long while.

"Tamar… told me to consult the person who had guided me to Awakening. Before trying to do anything. So, what? Was she right? Will I be silenced if I try to share my knowledge with the world?"

He walked over to the window and looked outside, his silhouette almost indistinguishable from the shadows.

"Well, that kid has some sense. What she tried to tell you was a bit too dramatic and extreme, but fundamentally, she is right. Of course, there are ways to go about it. You won't be able to offer this knowledge to the world freely, but the Sovereigns will not discard it, either. After all, it is another tool they can use.

So, as long as you are willing to let them use it as they see fit, and are ready to accept that it will only ever be used sparingly… I can arrange that."

He turned around and smiled.

"Alternatively, you can entrust it to me. Your friend said that this knowledge should not be shared while you are weak and lack backing. However, she is wrong about one thing. You do not lack backing, Rain, since you have me. I might not be capable enough to stand against the Sovereigns… just yet… but I am more than capable enough to disseminate information without being caught by them."

Rain frowned.

"What would be the point, though? You might be able to avoid them, but people who receive the knowledge from you won't be. So, the royal clans will just suppress them instead of me. Even if they fail to uproot the knowledge entirely, there will be countless victims. That is not what I want."

Her teacher grinned.

"Smart girl. Well… actually, that is all beside the point. In truth, you don't really need to hide that knowledge for long."

She raised an eyebrow, confused.

"I don't?"

He nodded.

"I'd say… by the end of this war, all your concerns will become moot. Or, well, we'll have bigger problems to solve at the very least. So, keep your secret safe until the war is over. Who knows, the situation might change entirely by then."

His voice grew a little lighter.

"In the meantime, work on becoming a Master. Maybe find a way to manifest a Flaw and an Aspect. Right, now that you have a soul core, we will have to teach you how to enter your Soul Sea…"

Rain listened to him with a smile.

At some point, she said:

"Teacher."

He paused.

"What?"

Rain remained silent for a moment, then said quietly:

"I am going to participate in the war."

For the first time in a long while, he seemed a little rattled.

"What kind of… have you lost your mind?"

She shook her head slowly.

"No. Actually… I've been thinking about it for a long time."

Rain sighed.

"Tamar said that I am naive, and I know you think that way, too. But I am not. Yes, I tend to assume the best of people, even if some of them don't deserve it. But I am not a fool."

He blinked a couple of times.

"Assuming the best of people who don't deserve it is pretty much the definition of being naive."

She looked at her soft hands, illuminated gently by the moonlight.

"In any case, the Sword Domain is going to declare war on the Song Domain. If the King of Swords wins… then, an occupation will follow. I can't just sit on the sidelines and watch without doing anything."

He pursed his lips.

"What, do you think that the Queen is any better? Valor might end up being the ones who initiate the war, but make no mistake. Clan Song wants it just as badly. More than that, what will change if one Sovereign replaces the other? Isn't it all the same for the simple people who live in the Song Domain? Not to mention that you don't belong to that Domain, to begin with.

You are from a government family."

Rain looked at him somberly.

"A government family? Sure, I am. But, Teacher… for how much longer will the government exist? Once there is only one royal clan instead of two, do you really think that they will allow an independent power to remain without submitting to their rule? Neutrality will become a myth, by then. And anyone who did not join the right side in the war will be branded as a sinner.

That includes government families like mine."

He lingered for a moment.

"I'm not sure about how much longevity the government has left, but you are right. The winner will certainly consolidate their power."

She shook her head.

"And yes, it matters which Sovereign rules the Song Domain. The royal clans might seem the same to you, but do you really think that the King of Swords, who is synonymous with Bastion, will treat

Ravenheart the same as his ancestral home? That he won't siphon resources from the conquered lands to feed the central regions? More than that… by the end of the war, many people would have died.

Citizens of the losing Domain will be occupied by the people who have killed their brothers, sisters, parents, and children on the battlefield. It won't be a peaceful process."

Her teacher sighed.

"Well… you are right. The King of Swords might certainly do something like that. And there will be some tension, and therefore some measures of suppression."

Rain smiled bitterly.

"And lastly, I do believe that both sides want the war. But, teacher… the people I know are in the Song Domain. Tamar and her clan. The porters from the survey team. The road manager who went out of his way to help me make more money while staying safe. The merchants who used to buy the materials I harvested.

Our neighbors in Ravenheart, who brought us food when we arrived from NQSC. Young Awakened guards who welcomed me back from the hunts. And so many more. They are all good people. These are the people I know, and they are the ones who will suffer if the Song Domain falls to the army of Clan Valor. So…"

She looked away.

"I can't claim any sort of moral superiority by choosing to fight for the Queen, but I can't step back and do nothing, either."

Rain took a deep breath and looked at her teacher resolutely.

"So I'll do what I can. Little as it may be."

He stared at her for a long time, not saying anything.

Before, she could see a hint of his expression, but now, his face was entirely shrouded in darkness.

Rain suddenly felt nervous. She had never seriously angered her teacher before… did she do it now?

Eventually, though, he let out a long sigh and said in a grumpy voice:

"...You're not making my job easier, you know that? Bah! What a troublesome student!"

Her teacher shook his head in dejection.

"But... I sort of expected that to happen."

He cursed.

"What can I say… I guess we are joining the army of Clan Song. Why the hell not? One side, two sides, three sides… at this point, what's the difference…"

Chapter-1833: Honesty is the Best Policy

Days before, Sunny had been left alone on a peaceful beach.

He just stood there motionlessly for a while, holding Neph's dress awkwardly and not knowing what to do with it.

Was he supposed to just leave it here? Or return it?

What would that scene even look like? Simply imagining it was a little terrifying.

'Here... your dress. You left it behind the last time.'

His face slowly turned a beautiful shade of pink.

Eventually, Sunny sighed, folded the dress gently, and put it down.

He put his own clothes back on, summoned the Nebulous Mantle, then briefly rinsed the dirty plates in the river and placed it all back into the picnic basket. He placed the blanket there, as well, and finally put the folded dress on top of it.

By then, the velvet sky was illuminated by a scattering of bright stars, and the world was bathed in moonlight.

He pushed the boat into the water and jumped inside. Rowing it upstream was not as effortless as it had been to drift downstream… not to mention that he was all alone now.

His side felt chilly.

Moving the oars and looking at the moon, Sunny let out another sigh.

'Well… it had to be done.'

He considered just using Shadow Step to return to Bastion, but then abandoned that idea. After all, that Aspect Ability belonged to the Lord of Shadows, not to Master Sunless… and although he had told Nephis the truth, these two were entirely different people as far as the rest of the world was concerned.

Sunny wasn't quite sure how much longer Master Sunless would be able to exist, and what role the humble shopkeeper would play, but he still wanted to remain cautious. It was not time to abandon that persona yet... hopefully, such a time would never come.

Listening to the soothing sounds of the river, he slowly savored the memories of today.

Seeing Nephis descend from the sky like a celestial fairy. Witnessing her easy smile at the docks. Rowing the boat side by side with her, pressed tightly against each other. Listening to her laugh as she dove into the water.

Sunlight reflecting from the surface of the river as she splashed him, standing near the shore in her tantalizing bathing suit.

And the rest…

'Maybe I could have handled it better?'

He probably could have, but she had caught him by surprise with her somewhat believable, but entirely mistaken theory of who Master Sunless really was.

Remembering Neph's subtly smug expression, Sunny couldn't help but laugh quietly.

"Ah… what will I do with her…"

In any case, he had got his point across. He confessed his secret identity, made sure to explain that deceiving her had not been his intention, and expressed the sincerity of his feelings.

The rest was up to Nephis.

And speaking of Nephis…

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, and then asked silently:

[Cassie? Are you listening?]

There was a stretch of silence, and then, her calm voice resounded in his mind.

[I am.]

Sunny froze, then cleared his throat in embarrassment.

'Come to think of it. I sort of threw Cassie under the bus, didn't?'

Well… better not mention it! Ever...

Sunny pretended not to remember doing anything of the sort and asked:

[I assume you witnessed everything?]

She didn't deny it.

[I did. For what it's worth… I think you did a good job. It was the right decision.]

Sunny exhaled slowly.

[I hope it was. But…]

However, before he could finish the sentence, Cassie suddenly interrupted him — which was a bit strange, since it was not at all like her.

[Oh.]

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

[What's the matter?]

There was a long stretch of silence, and then Cassie spoke again, her voice sounding a little strange:

[Oh… oh my.]

Sunny frowned.

[Is something wrong?]

This time, her response came almost immediately.

[No, of course not. I just… s—sorry! Can't speak right now!]

With that, Cassie's voice grew silent, and she did not respond again.

Sunny continued to row the boat upstream in bewilderment.

After a while, thinking about something, he winced.

'Ah. I hope she survives…'

***

Far away, on a tranquil heavenly island, an ivory pagoda seemed to shimmer with reflected moonlight. On one of its higher levels, a delicate young woman was sitting behind the desk, tracing her fingers across a parchment. Her lovely face was enchantingly beautiful, and her long hair was like a cascade of pale gold.

At that moment, the young woman turned her head to the white stone of the chamber's outer wall.

Her expression changed slightly.

"Oh."

In the next moment, something crashed into the island with a resounding boom.

Cassie slowly rose from behind her desk.

"Oh… oh my."

Then, she walked out from behind the desk and faced the door.

Her movements were poised and elegant, but also… seemed a little nervous, for some reason?

She frowned slightly.

'I'm… I'm sure it'll be fine.'

Sunny's voice resounded in her mind:

[Is something wrong?]

Cassie hesitated for a moment.

[No. Of course not.]

But then…

The door flew open with a bang, and a tall figure appeared on the threshold, clad in an intricate suit of enchanted armor.

Cassie gulped.

"Neph. When did you get ba…"

Nephis was already inside, the door slamming shut behind her.

"Why didn't you tell me?!"

Her face was flushed, and her usually calm eyes were full of scathing intensity.

Cassie lingered for a moment.

"Tell you what?"

Neph was approaching her with wide strides.

Her office, sadly, wasn't that large…

"Don't give me that! I know that you saw everything! E—everything…"

Cassie made her best effort to flutter her eyelashes innocently. Unfortunately, her eyes were hidden behind a blindfold, so it had no effect.

She tilted her head in a flawless imitation of a confused lack of understanding, and said:

"How could I have seen anything? I'm blind…"

Her tone was soft and elegant. To illustrate her argument, she pointed at the blindfold.

Instead of answering, Neph lunged at her.

Cassie made her best effort to hold in a frightened squeal and evaded the grab with a graceful step. It wasn't that hard to do, since her Awakened Ability warned her of danger in advance.

Luckily, Nephis was not using her full titanic speed. Otherwise, Cassie might not have been able to escape even with the forewarning…

"N—now wait a minute, Neph… I can explain!"

"Sure you can! Stop dodging and come here, then. I'll let you explain…"

"I… I'd rather not…"

"Too late!"

Something crashed loudly inside the office.

"No, but when did you get so slippery?!"

"I'm not slippery! I'm adroit and graceful!"

"Oh yes you are… for now…"

"Wait!"

There was another loud crash.

"Ah! Stop breaking my furniture!"

"I'll buy you a new desk…"

"That's not the point!"

"Come here, or I'll buy you a new shelf, too…"

…The Fire Keepers, who had gathered on the lower level of the Ivory Tower in frightful silence, looked at each other.

Eventually, one of them said:

"We didn't hear anything. Right?"

Another nodded.

"Of course. In fact, I am currently asleep in my cabin on the Chain Breaker."

"I was never even here. I am actually in the waking world right now."

"I think my Flaw made me deaf."

There were a few moments of silence.

"Let's just go… before she decides to buy a new door, too…"

With that, they quietly dispersed.

Chapter-1834: As Simple as That

Some time later, Cassie's office was a mess. The actual damage wasn't that severe, but there were parchments and sheets of paper scattered everywhere.

The two young women were sitting on the floor, breathing heavily. Cassie's blindfold was a little crooked.

Nephis glared at her for a while, then groaned and hid her face between her knees.

Eventually, her muffled voice resounded in the stone chamber:

"I… I forgot to retrieve my damned dress…"

Hearing that, Cassie livened up a little, as if feeling a chance to redeem herself.

"Oh! Don't worry. He picked it up."

Instead of answering, Nephis slowly raised her hands and silently grabbed her head.

After a few moments of silence, she said:

"When is the war starting? Let's go to war, Cas…"

The blind seer smiled.

"Of course. I'll go with you."

She paused for a moment, then added softly:

"But honestly, I don't know why you are reacting so strongly."

Nephis raised her head and looked at the other young woman in

astonishment.

"Why? I'm embarrassed! Embarrassed! I'm so embarrassed that I want to fall through the earth."

Cassie smiled slightly.

"Really? Well…embarrassed is better than angry, I think."

She paused for a moment, then asked cautiously:

"Are you disappointed?"

Nephis remained silent for a while, then sighed and leaned tiredly on the wall.

"No. Yes? Maybe."

She gritted her teeth.

"I am disappointed, but I am also excited. Ah, I don't know…"

She hesitated for a while.

"I liked many things about Master Sunless, and some of those things were how soft and… safe he was. Unlike me, and everything around me. I'm sad that these qualities of him were a deception."

Nephis frowned.

"But then, they weren't, really? The man I've come to know… and like… is not an illusion. It's just that I've only been exposed to a part of him. That part is still real, though… it's so confusing."

Her voice grew a little heated:

"And then there is his other part. The Lord of Shadows. He is someone I… appreciate. Someone whom I might have wondered about — what would it be like, if he stood by my side? That was a nice thought."

She leaned her head on the wall.

"So do I think that I lost something? Or did I unexpectedly gain the best of the both worlds? Or is it both? I'm confused."

Then, Nephis hid her face in her knees again and let out another groan.

"But that is not even what matters!"

Cassie, who had been listening to her tirade silently, raised an eyebrow.

There were very few people in the world that Nephis felt comfortable with enough to let herself be so open and frank. In fact, there was probably no one except for Cassie — so, she did not want to interrupt.

But now, she had to.

"It's not? What matters, then?"

Nephis raised her head and glared at her silently.

After a while, she opened her mouth and said:

"It's just… it's just… is not how it was supposed to be!"

Cassie touched her hair awkwardly.

"How was it supposed to be?"

Nephis let out a heavy sigh.

"I just thought… that I will spend some time with Master Sunless and try to enjoy myself. Maybe something would come out of it, and maybe not. In any case, it was supposed to be a timed entanglement. Soon enough… before anything too serious might have happened… I would have left Bastion and gone to war.

And then, by the time it was over, a year or several years later, I would have been able to decide what to do then."

She looked at Cassie intently.

"Do you see the problem here, Cas? There is no "then" anymore! Because even if I leave Bastion, he'll still be with me!"

Cassie pretended to study her expression. She wished dearly to be able to see Neph's face right now, but she couldn't. It was just the two of them in the room, so she could only see herself.

Eventually, Cassie chuckled lightly.

"I see."

She took a deep breath and lingered for a while.

"Actually… I knew that Master Sunless and the Lord of Shadows were the same person for a while now. I trusted that he had no ill intentions toward you, and he asked me to keep his secret until he found an opportunity to tell you himself. That was why I kept quiet. But, honestly… I wanted you to enjoy yourself, as well.

I knew that you would go into the Changing Star of the Immortal Flame mode as soon as you learned that he was a powerful Saint. You tend to forget that you are a human, too, Neph. And humans need repose, sometimes."

Cassie paused, the light smile disappearing from her lips.

"There were some other reasons, as well, but there is no point in talking about it. In any case, he promised me that he would tell you before the war, and now, he did. So, that secret is in the open."

Cassie remained silent for a while, and then sighed.

"So, you need to make a decision now."

Nephis looked at her somberly.

Eventually, she asked in a quiet tone:

"But how do I decide what to do? You know that I am… not good with these things. Feelings, bonds, and distractions."

Cassie couldn't help but laugh.

"Yes, I know… the fact that you used the word "distractions" is proof enough. But, actually, it is very simple. I'll help you make the right decision."

Nephis looked at her with subtle hope.

Cassie spoke softly:

"Follow my lead. Close your eyes. Now, imagine meeting Master Sunless tomorrow... and telling him that whatever there is between you two cannot continue, and you are ending it immediately. That you will be nothing but colleagues in the future, fighting side by side as allies. And nothing more."

Nephis followed her advice. Cassie could not see, but she felt her friend's shoulder slump a little.

She smiled.

"How does it feel?"

Nephis remained silent for a while.

Eventually, she said with a hint of reluctance in her voice:

"...Terrible."

Cassie sighed in satisfaction.

"Then, don't do that. Instead, do the opposite. There, it's as simple as that."

Nephis opened her eyes and looked at the blind seer silently.

Her expression must have been a little startled.

Cassie shrugged with a smile.

"Feelings, bonds, and distractions are not that complicated. Haven't you been studying passions recently? Just follow your passion, and things will work out. Even if they don't, you won't regret making the effort. The only thing you'll regret is never giving it your best."

Nephis blinked a couple of times, staring at her strangely.

Cassie frowned.

"What?"

Her friend shook her head.

"No, nothing. It's just that… how are you so good at this? You've never had a boyfriend, either."

Cassie faced her with an expression of horror.

"What? What do you mean, never had a boyfriend? I was very popular in school, you know!"

Nephis raised an eyebrow.

"Sure. But did you have a boyfriend?"

Cassie opened her mouth.

"That's beside the point! And, by the way… when are you going to buy me a new desk?!"

Nephis rose to her feet, patted down her armor, and headed for the door.

"No, really! I need a desk!"

Neph paused at the threshold, looked back for a moment, and said before disappearing in a subtly rushed manner:

"I mean, you are in charge of finances. Put a request for a new desk… on my behalf… anyway, see you later. I think I know what to do now."

A moment later, her receding voice resounded from the corridor:

"Good night!"

Chapter-1835: Next Morning

Sunny reached Bastion in the dead of night. He tied the boat to the pier, climbed ashore, and walked slowly in the direction of the Brilliant Emporium. There was a lot on his mind, so he was not in a hurry to get home.

Eventually, though, he did.

The Marvelous Mimic opened its door unprompted to welcome him back. It even retracted the terrifying fangs, which were usually out at night, back inside the door frame.

Sunny patted the lintel, walked into the dining hall absentmindedly, placed the picnic basket on a table, and sighed.

He was a bit tired, but doubted that he would be able to sleep tonight.

And indeed, Sunny wasn't able to douse the flames blazing in his mind for a long time. He tossed and turned in the bed, only falling asleep shortly before dawn.

As a result, he overslept, only waking up from the sounds of Aiko entering the shop. Since his petite assistant had showed up for work, the morning crowd wasn't far behind, either.

Sunny sat up and rubbed his face, then went about washing up for the long day ahead.

'Will she come?'

He figured that Nephis would need a long time to sort her feelings out, but still put extra effort into making himself look presentable on the off chance that she would not.

Aiko's voice resounded from downstairs while he was in the middle of his routine.

"Hey, boss! What should I do with the basket?"

Sunny swept his wet hair back and responded casually:

"Ah… there are some dirty dishes inside. Give them a rinse."

He washed them in the river yesterday, but everything still needed to be cleaned properly.

Sunny continued to get himself ready. There were no mirrors inside the Mimic, so he used the gloomy shadow to look at himself instead.

Needless to say, the shadow was not amused by having to stare at his mug first thing in the morning... or ever, really.

'That guy never changes...'

It was then that Sunny froze, opened his eyes wide, then dashed down while summoning the Nebulous Mantle.

"No, Aiko! Wait!"

But it was too late.

The petite girl was standing in the kitchen, the picnic basket floating in the air by her side. It was open, and Aiko… was holding a beautiful white dress in her hands.

Sunny grew still.

"That…"

She looked at him with wide eyes and asked in a small voice:

"Boss… uh… why did you bring a girl's dress back from your picnic?"

Sunny stammered:

"It's n—not what you think… I didn't do anything! She just ran off… without her dress… it happened that way…"

Aiko stared at the dress silently.

Then, a small frown appeared on her face.

"Wait a minute… these measurements…"

In the next moment, she was standing next to Sunny, poking him in the chest with a finger.

"That is Changing Star's dress! You! You debaucherous scoundrel! What did you do to Nephis?!"

Sunny softened the Onyx Shell, afraid that Aiko would bruise her finger, and pretended to reel back from her jabs.

"I didn't do anything! We were just escaping the heat in the river… and what do you mean, scoundrel?! Weren't you the one who encouraged me to strike while the iron was hot?!"

"When did I ever?!"

"Ouch! I don't remember! But you definitely did!"

It was then that the silver bell hanging above the door rang, and they both froze.

Someone was standing at the entrance, looking at them calmly.

Tasteful white clothes, beautiful figure, lustrous silver hair…

Sunny's heart skipped a beat.

It was Nephis.

She lowered her gaze and looked at the dress, which Aiko was still holding in her hand.

Nephis smiled politely.

"Oh. I've been looking for that."

Walking into the kitchen, she took it from the petite girl's hand and looked at Sunny with sparkling eyes.

"Thank you for picking it up, Master Sunless."

He inhaled slowly.

"Ah… y—yes. Sure."

Why was she acting so nonchalant? What was she thinking?

'Did she come here to… to condemn me, or to embrace me?'

He gulped and asked cautiously:

"I… I hope everything is fine. After what happened yesterday."

Nephis nodded curtly.

"It's fine."

Then, she frowned a bit and mumbled quietly:

"No, actually, now that I think about it... after what happened last night, I'll need to replace some furniture…"

Sunny flinched.

"...What?"

At the same time, Aiko's eyes widened even more.

"What?!"

Nephis looked at them in confusion.

"Oh. Sorry. I was just talking to myself."

She paused for a moment, noticing their expressions, and then added hesitantly:

"Uh... did I say something wrong again?"

***

Eventually, Sunny managed to leave the stunned Aiko behind and

lead Nephis to somewhere more private.

And now that they were there, he was silently cursing himself.

'No, but… am I an idiot? Why didn't I go downstairs, to the Memory shop? Why did I bring her upstairs instead?!'

Currently, they were… in his bedroom.

While Sunny was berating himself, Nephis looked around with curiosity.

"Is that where you sleep? This version of you, I mean."

Sunny forced out a smile.

"Ah… yes. At least one incarnation of me has to, from time to time. The others don't sleep, but since I am supposed to be the most human one, I do."

He silently evaluated his bedroom and thanked the dead gods for the habit of always making his bed first thing in the morning. The room was clean and cozy, with a beautiful view of the Mirror Lake beyond the window. The Castle was bathed in the golden light of dawn… and there, above it, the Ivory Island was shrouded by clouds.

Nephis stared at his bed for a few moments, as if trying to remember something, then turned away and looked out of the window.

A hint of a smile appeared on her lips.

"I think I can see my window from here."

Sunny would lie if he said that he had not spent plenty of time staring at the distant silhouette of the Ivory Tower, so he kept silent.

Instead, he gestured to a few items decorating his room.

"These are some curios that I collected in the Dream Realm over the years. They are… nothing much. But exploring the past is one of my hobbies."

Nephis studied them for a while, then turned to face him and said simply:

"I know."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"You… know?"

She hesitated for a few moments.

"The Exploration Report on the Tomb of Ariel, written by Nobody. You are Nobody… aren't you?"

Chapter-1836: Resolution

He was startled by that question. It had come out of nowhere, completely crushing his expectations of what she wanted to talk about... both the best and the worst of them.

Sunny remained silent until the pain of the Flaw made it difficult, and then nodded slowly, choosing not to say anything else. The more he said, the higher were the chances of her asking him something that he was unable to answer.

Nephis sighed, then explained calmly:

"I started to suspect it after meeting the Lord of Shadows for the first time. He… you… were too strong to have come out of nowhere. A Saint as powerful as that simply had to have left a mark on the world. And when I asked who had taught you my family's swordsmanship, you answered that... that nobody had. I did not note it initially, but later, something seemed to click in my mind."

She paused for a few moments, took a deep breath, and then spoke:

"The memories of everyone who had entered the Third Nightmare with me are... affected. We don't really know every detail of what happened there. But there, in Godgrave, I guessed something."

Nephis paused before adding:

"The Tomb of Ariel. You were…"

However, before she could form the question, Sunny interrupted her by raising his hand.

There was a complicated expression on his face.

Inside, he was full of intense happiness at the thought of Nephis

knowing that they had challenged the Third Nightmare together. It was not exactly the same as remembering him... but it was something, at least. Something infinitely more meaningful than the nothingness of his current situation.

But he also knew that she would not be able to remember his answer.

And, unlike Cassie, who was able to retain the memory of having forgotten something due to her Aspect, Nephis would not be able to do even that.

So, instead of confessing the truth, Sunny said quietly:

"Before you say anything else, I must confess something. There are… certain things that my Flaw prevents me from sharing. So, please... some words are better left unsaid."

Nephis studied him intently for a while, then let out a heavy sigh.

"I see. I… think I understand."

She turned away and smiled faintly.

"That explains it. Why Cassie put so much trust in you. And why her condition has improved so suddenly…"

Sunny turned away quietly.

He had misled her with his warning. But it seemed that his deception had led her to the right conclusions, at least.

Nephis looked at the distant Ivory Island again.

"I won't say that I am not disappointed. But if this is how it is... I won't ask, then."

Her back was very straight.

After a while, Sunny heard her even voice again:

"I will ask you something else, though. Sunless."

He took a deep breath., suddenly feeling nervous.

This was the moment of truth.

'How ironic.'

"What?"

Nephis turned around and smiled.

Her voice was calm and even:

"I'm leaving Bastion in seven days. So… will you take me on another date? In Godgrave."

Sunny looked at her breathlessly.

Suddenly bashful, Nephis glanced down.

"I… I know that it is not the most romantic location…"

But he interrupted her again.

Breaking into a smile, Sunny nodded.

"Yes. Yes, I will... I'll be delighted to."

He paused for a moment, and the added:

"In fact, I have no choice but to follow you to Godgrave, Nephis."

She hesitantly raised her eyebrow:

"You don't?"

Chuckling, Sunny nodded.

"Of course."

He took a step forward and offered her his hand.

"After all… I am still contractually obligated to forge that sword for you. How can I leave your side before it's finished?"

She smiled...

And took it.

***

And that was it.

Their strange, tentative relationship had not ended despite the many secrets they were keeping, the heavy burden of the forgotten past, and the dark shadow of the imminent war. It was going to continue tenaciously despite the uncertain future.

Which made both of them happy… Sunny, at least, felt incredible joy.

It was both strange and wonderful. The circumstances couldn't be any worse… the timing was absolutely atrocious, as well.

But when had it not been?

In hindsight, there had always been something standing between them.

Neither Sunny nor Nephis had any time to think about their feelings on the Forgotten Shore. Then, they were separated for two long years. After Nephis returned, they only spent a month together before he left for Antarctica. And after Antarctica, he was forgotten by everyone, including her.

They had only had a few fleeting moments to be together in peace, in the depths of the Third Nightmare.

So, strangely enough… despite having known her for almost ten years, this was the first time Sunny had enough maturity to not only know what he wanted, but also be able to express his feelings.

So what if the timing was terrible, and there was a war approaching? If he decided to wait for a good moment to act on his desires, he would have had to wait forever.

…After talking some more, he showed Nephis out and returned to the Brilliant Emporium while whistling an upbeat melody.

However, once he was inside, he was met by Aiko's chilly gaze.

"What are you so happy about?"

Sunny grinned and suppressed the desire to pinch her cheeks.

Instead, he said happily:

"I just agreed to follow Lady Nephis to war."

The petite girl glared at him silently.

"...There's going to be a war?"

Sunny nodded.

"Oh, right. You didn't know. Yeah, there is."

Aiko kept silent for a while, then let out a long sigh and sat down.

"And you're going with Nephis to that war?"

He gave her a carefree shrug.

"It seems so."

Aiko sighed again, then covered her face with both hands and groaned.

"Gods... not again! Why… why does this keep happening to me?! No, really… why?!"

Sunny looked at her guiltily, then walked over and patted the petite girl on the head.

His voice sounded bright:

"Aiko... don't worry too much. It's going to be fine. Let me ask you something…"

When she looked up at him with teary eyes, he grinned and asked cheerfully:

"...Have you heard about the wonderful world of war profiteering?"

Chapter-1837: Part of Life

A few days later, Sunny dove into the cold waters of the Mirror Lake while the full moon slowly climbed the lightless sky. It was the last full moon before the great war between the two Domains set both worlds aflame, and therefore, the last chance he had to meet Cassie in the ruined stronghold of a dead daemon.

Infiltrating the true Bastion unnoticed was still somewhat difficult…

However, Sunny was tense for an entirely different reason.

'Rain… ah. That girl is really committed to making my life overly exciting, isn't she?'

It was shortly before his sister expressed her determination to participate in the Domain War on the side of Queen Song.

Which wasn't really a big surprise to Sunny, who knew Rain well enough to guess that she would not stay idle. She was too compassionate and not nearly jaded enough to let her neighbors be bullied without trying to do something about it — no matter how small her contribution would be, in the grand scheme of things. So, he wasn't that angry.

In fact, he was happy to see that she still retained this kind of innocence. He was also a little proud to know that she had this kind of integrity — something that he had always lacked, and only barely found in Antarctica before losing it all over again.

But still, what brother wanted to see his little sister put herself in danger?

Honestly, Sunny wanted nothing more than to whisk her to the Nameless Temple and keep her under lock until everything was over. No… the Nameless Temple wasn't safe enough, considering what role

it was supposed to play. Nowhere was really safe anymore, and nothing would be really over for a long while.

However, the main reason Sunny had not tried to dissuade Rain from joining the war was that she had to make her own choices, earn her own triumphs, and suffer from her own mistakes in order to learn and grow. No matter how much he worried about her safety, he would never want to become someone who stifled her growth with overbearing care instead of aiding it.

That would only be a disservice, especially for someone as bright and dauntless as Rain was.

Plus… so what if she was going to war? It would be a little tricky, without a doubt, but Sunny was quite confident in his ability to keep her alive even in the middle of a battlefield. Who was there among the champions of Song and Valor whom he couldn't handle?

Well, alright, there were the Sovereigns... but he could at least run away from them safely.

So, this war could very well become a harsh, but indispensable opportunity for her to mature and grow stronger — both in terms of ability and mentality.

It was the latter part that Sunny was worried about. Not because he thought that Rain couldn't handle it, but because he knew that she would be left with invisible scars even if she did.

…Scars were a part of life as well, though. They were a part of growth.

'Ah, I don't know.'

In any case, there was nothing he could do about it now. So, Sunny tried to forget his worries and concentrate on the task at hand.

Cassie was waiting for him near the collapsed tower, her beautiful hair glistening in moonlight like pale gold.

She was in one piece, and seemingly alive. There were no visible bruises anywhere, either. So, Sunny felt a little less guilty about

exposing her to Neph's wrath.

'I'll make it up to her later, somehow...'

Rising from the water, he climbed onto the remains of the fallen tower.

"Hey, Cassie."

Cassie smiled faintly.

"Hey, Sunny."

It was still strange — and heartwarming — to hear someone call him by his name. Sunny enjoyed the feeling and looked at the crumbling walls of the ruined fortress.

They seemed even more deserted than before.

He raised an eyebrow.

"I don't see any Knights on the walls."

She nodded.

"There was no call for the vassals to assemble their armies, yet, but the royal clan has already started to move its forces. Most of the Knights and Paladins are heading north. Awakened soldiers, too. It is hard to notice on the streets of the false Bastion, but here, their absence can be felt."

Cassie hesitated for a few moments.

"...The king is still here, though. So we need to be careful."

He offered her his hand without wasting any time, then pulled them both into the Mirror Maze.

Once they were in the familiar stone chamber, Sunny let go of Cassie's hand, summoned the Shadow Lantern, and said:

"I am glad that you are okay… and I'm sorry for putting you in a difficult situation. Well, I am sure that Nephis was her usual

composed and restrained self. But still. The two of you must have had a heated conversation."

Cassie faced him, and for a moment, there was a strange expression on her face.

"Oh… yes. Indeed. She was her usual, composed self."

With that, she turned to the door and smiled.

"It's alright. I was actually glad to see her a little flustered. You did a fine job, by the way. Telling her. Now that this obstacle is behind the two of you, the future seems a little brighter."

Sunny sighed quietly.

"I hope so, too. But… to tell you the truth, I am as worried and apprehensive about it as I am relieved and elated. There are things I simply can't tell her, after all. Can we really be together when we can't even be honest with each other? I am worried."

Cassie smiled.

"Of course, you can. Honesty is important, but it is also overrated. If people were entirely honest with each other, there would have been no romance in the world. What do you think a relationship is? At the start, everyone hides their true selves and only shows the other person their best side.

And by the time two people come together, even if some details remain hidden, the important truths shine through. I think you showed her the important truth splendidly."

Sunny stared at her silently for a while.

It was strange, but after hearing her words, he suddenly felt a lot better.

Sensing his reaction, Cassie raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

He shook his head.

"Nothing, really. It's just that… how are you so good at giving advice? You've never been in a relationship before, yourself. It's weird!"

Cassie seemed mortified.

"W—who said that I've never…"

Sunny gave her a dubious look.

"Please."

The young woman remained motionless for a few moments, then slowly turned her back to him.

Her voice sounded a little irked:

"Unbelievable… that's two times in a week, now…"

Chapter-1838: Palace of Imagination

Soon, a tide of shadows swallowed the Mirror Maze, and they continued their meticulous exploration.

Sunny did not really hope to reveal the secret of the maze tonight. In fact, by now, he was starting to suspect that he would never be able to reach its heart that way — simply because what he was doing was inherently wrong.

It was impossible to reach the Tomb of Ariel no matter how long one marched across the Nightmare Desert… at least during the day. He believed that the only way to approach the great pyramid was to brave the sea of dunes at night, when it was the most dangerous.

Similarly, there must have been some trick to traversing the labyrinth of mirrors. Perhaps by drowning the maze in shadows and neutering its mirror walls, Sunny was preventing himself from making any progress.

He sighed.

Behind him, Cassie hesitated for a few moments, and then said quietly:

"That girl in the Song Domain…"

Sunny glanced back with a neutral expression, knowing what she wanted, but couldn't ask.

"...She is someone precious."

The blind seer remained silent for a while.

Eventually, she smiled and said with a hint of wonder in her voice:

"It is funny, isn't it? The entire world is frozen in fear and anticipation of a great war that will shape history. And yet, no one is aware that something no less important has happened in the desolate wilderness of the Dream Realm, witnessed by nobody except for a young Legacy girl, you, and me. A human of the waking world Awakening without being cursed by the Nightmare Spell.

Your achievement… is remarkable."

A pale smile appeared on Sunny's lips, as well.

"Funny? It is a bit funny, I guess."

He remained silent for a few moments, and then added:

"However, this achievement can only become important in the future. She can only make a difference in the future. Right now… it is up to people like us — you, me, and Nephis — to make sure that there is a future for people like her to make history."

His smile turned a little bittersweet.

"In fact, if there is a future… I hope that what we did becomes all but forgotten, and only what they did is remembered. Such a wish is quite ironic coming from someone like me, isn't it?"

Cassie chuckled.

"It is… especially when expressed to someone like me. Although, I must say — I doubt that there is someone like you or me out there. Or will ever be again."

Sunny couldn't help but laugh quietly.

"Gods. I hope not."

It would be quite sad, if someone in the future had to suffer like him, and was forced to do the same terrible things that he had done or was yet to do, still.

Just then, they made another turn… and froze.

His eyes widened.

'...I'll be damned.'

Sunny had not expected to discover anything in the Mirror Maze tonight, but, unexpectedly… he did.

Out there in front of them, the narrow corridor opened into a vast hall. The mirror walls that had been pressing down on them expanded, disappearing into the distance. The floor of the underground chamber was sloping downward like a bowl, and the ceiling was out of sight.

The spherical hall was so vast that Sunny could not see the other end of it. In fact, he couldn't see anything, as if something was obscuring his vision. His shadow sense was similarly suppressed.

All he could feel was that the hall was enormous, ancient… and dangerous.

Sunny's instincts were screaming that he needed to retreat. This sense of dire danger reminded him of the worst horrors he had experienced in his life.

...Then, there was a sound in the darkness.

Chilled to the bone, Sunny looked down and felt something that did not make any sense, and yet filled him with a sense of terror.

A wave of cold water rolled over the floor and licked his boots, pieces of ice drifting in the foam, then receded… as if he was standing on the shore of a freezing ocean.

Then, there was another sound.

The rustle of countless leaves and the creaking of enormous branches.

Wisps of mist drifted in the darkness, brushing against his skin like cold tendrils.

The ghastly smell of the outskirts assaulted his nose.

Before anything happened, Sunny grabbed Cassie and pulled her back into the corridor. Then, feeling that it was not enough, he stepped through the shadows and brought them back to the stone chamber.

Letting go of the blind seer, he leaned on the wall heavily.

His vision returned. Both of them were deathly pale, and trembling.

"W—what… what the hell was that?"

Cassie's voice was subdued.

Sunny forced himself to calm down and let out a stifled laugh.

It wasn't easy to scare two Saints, and yet, here they were.

"The Demon of Imagination… damn."

Cassie raised her eyebrow.

"What do you mean?"

Sunny slowly straightened his back and brushed his hair back.

"This castle was created by the Demon of Imagination once, wasn't it? So, there have to be traces of her power left here. The mirrors are one such relic. The hall we found… I think it is another."

The blind seer frowned.

"The icy water, the rustle of countless leaves, the mist… what do they have to do with the Demon of Imagination?"

Sunny slowly shook his head.

"Nothing. But… when we entered the hall, I felt a sense of danger, and couldn't help but remember some of the most harrowing encounters of my life. And so…"

He hesitated for a few moments, struggling to believe in the theory that had formed in his mind.

Eventually, though, Sunny finished his thought in a low tone:

"And so, the hall made them real."

Cassie's face paled.

"You mean… you mean to say that that place can make what we fear into reality?"

Sunny lingered for a while, then shook his head again.

"No… if I am right, then it is not what we fear."

He shivered, and the added in a somber tone:

"It's what we imagine."

Come to think of it, he must have gone blind there because of Cassie.

'Damned daemons…'

Why did every one of them have to be scarier than the next?

Cassie seemed a little shocked by his suggestion, too.

She hesitated for a while, then asked in a small voice:

"Then, do you want… to go try again? There is still time before dawn..."

Sunny laughed.

"Are you crazy? Just think about what is hidden there, in our heads. Let's not even mention that one of us might accidentally think about having their limbs severed or skin peeled off. Can you control your thoughts completely? What if you imagine that Cursed Tyrant, Condemnation? What if you think about the Forgotten God?"

He took a deep breath.

"I knew that there would be some kind of challenge at the heart of the Mirror Maze. But this… this is beyond what I have imagined. Pun intended. Conquering that hall is a lethal task, even for us. No...

especially for us.

Because we have seen too much, and remember too much."

It definitely wasn't something that could be accomplished in a day.

If he wanted to reach the heart of the Hall of Imagination… he would need to prepare thoroughly.

…Sadly, there was no time.

Sunny looked at the door of the stone chamber with regret, and then sighed.

"It doesn't matter. I had a small hope of finding what I seek here before the war, but I can find it after we win, too. By then, there will be no King of Swords and no Clan Valor. I won't need to hide in the darkness and come here only once a month. So… I will return to this eerie place then."

With that, Sunny offered Cassie his hand and forced out a smile.

"Let's leave, for now. There is a lot I have to do in these next few days."

It was true. Because these…

Would be the last days of peace.

Chapter-1839: Last Days of Peace

Pale sunshine poured through the open window, and a gentle breeze made the curtains flutter. Sunny opened his eyes slowly, laying comfortably in his opulent bed. The subtle sounds of the city waking up washed over him, bright and lively on this peaceful morning.

He yawned, then slowly got up.

Today was like any other day in Bastion. There were some changes about the mood on the streets of the young city as of late, but mostly, it was the same. The Brilliant Emporium was also the same — except for one detail.

There was a hand-drawn sign standing in front of the entrance. It had been there for the past few days, attracting plenty of attention.

The sign said:

"Closing soon

*Temporarily

**Farewell discounts for everyone! Best waffles in two worlds!"

As a result, Sunny had earned quite a lot of coins in the last day or two. The Brilliant Emporium seemed to have gathered a loyal audience, and the regulars were both sad to see it temporarily close doors and in a hurry to visit it one last time.

But today…

Today was the last day.

So, Sunny wanted to make it perfect.

Reaching the kitchen, he was surprised to see that Aiko was already there. The petite girl usually liked to sleep a lot — if it wasn't for the job, she would have lazed around in bed until noon. But today, she was there before Sunny.

He looked at her in surprise.

"...I'm not seeing things, am I?"

She grinned.

"Of course not, boss! What are you talking about? I have always been dependable, punctual, and diligent!"

Sunny looked at her with doubt.

"Dependable, punctual, and diligent… do you even know what these words mean?"

Aiko nodded energetically.

"Of course, boss!"

He stared at her some more, then sighed.

"Well, whatever. Start preparing the ingredients."

The petite girl made a fist and floated up a little.

"Yes, boss! I love you, boss!"

He shuddered.

Aiko had been like that after realizing how profitable a war could be to an establishment dealing with Memories. Her eyes had not stopped sparkling since. Sunny could practically see all kinds of nefarious schemes forming in her twisted little head.

'At least someone is happy…'

He manifested an avatar and went about welcoming the first customers.

A few familiar faces visited the Brilliant Emporium that day.

Early in the morning, he guided Beth to her usual table and brewed her some coffee. The dark circles under the young woman's eyes were even more pronounced than usual, and she seemed to be partially asleep.

Sunny was a little touched that she made time to visit the Brilliant Emporium on its closing day despite that.

"Here's your coffee, Miss Beth. Thank you for coming to say goodbye."

She stared at him tiredly, then blinked a couple of times.

"Huh? Goodbye?"

Sunny hesitated for a moment.

"Yes? We are closing today… temporarily."

Beth frowned.

"Oh, really? I didn't know. I haven't left the lab in a week… no, wait, what day is it today? In ten days?"

Sunny looked at her silently, not knowing what to say. His pleasant smile froze a little.

She sighed.

"Well... it's a shame. I really grew to like this place! Good luck to you, Master Sunless… in whatever it is that you are going to do next."

His smile widened a little.

"Good luck to you as well, Miss Beth. I really hope that you succeed. But, please… take care of yourself. Your life is precious, too."

She sipped her coffee and smiled with a hint of bittersweet sadness in her eyes.

"I know. After all, there was someone who paid a great price to save

it. So, I have to live well…"

Shortly after, Sunny served Teacher Julius breakfast and tea. The old man seemed strangely down, looking in the window with a distracted look.

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then asked politely:

"Is something bothering you, Awakened Julius?"

The old man perked up a little.

"Ah, Master Sunless. It's nothing much… I'm just feeling old these days. I was born before there was even such a thing as the Nightmare Spell, you know. A youngster like you might not understand…"

He looked in the window and sighed.

"The world keeps changing, and old fossils like me can't keep up. Maybe it's time for me to retire."

Sunny sat down across from him and chuckled.

"What are you talking about, Awakened Julius? You, of all people, must not retire."

Teacher Julius raised an eyebrow.

"Oh? Why? Right… you probably don't know, but my course has never been very popular. I am usually lucky to get one or two students to attend… they are always the best students at the Academy, of course, but still! It's a bit…"

Sunny shook his head.

"It is because the world is changing that you must never retire. Think about it. Wilderness survival might not have been very in demand before — but it was only useful to a handful of Awakened before, as well."

He gestured to the quiet street outside.

"Now, there are many more Awakened out there. There are mundane people living in the Dream Realm, too. There are roads being built between new cities and trade routes being established. We are not just surviving in the wilderness anymore — we are trying to conquer it. So, experts like you will become more precious than gold very soon."

Teacher Julius stared at him with a strange expression for a while.

Then, his eyes glistened.

"You think so?"

Sunny nodded.

"Of course!"

The old man was suddenly full of energy and smiled.

"No… but you are right! The development of civilization is like a conquest of the wilds. Now that civilization is developing in the Dream Realm, youngsters like you will need someone with a bit of sense to guide them. I might not have a lot of sense, but I do know a thing or two about the Dream Realm. Let's see… I just need to change my approach a little…"

It was the same infectious enthusiasm Sunny was familiar with. Smiling, he quietly left Teacher Julius to contemplate and left to serve other customers.

At some point, Kim and Luster entered the dining hall.

They seemed a little disheartened to see the Brilliant Emporium closing its doors.

Luster shook Sunny's hand and gripped his shoulder with a strangely emotional look on his face.

"I think I know why you have no choice but to do it, Master Sunless. Those damned rumors…"

The young man's eyes were almost glistening with tears.

"But, for whatever it is worth, I want you to know that, for me… and many others like me… you are a hero. A true hero! Princess Nephis, damn… I admire you so much, Master Sunless! Please, teach me your ways!"

Kim silently grabbed him by the collar, pulled him back, and gave Sunny an apologetic look.

"Please ignore my idiot husband, Master Sunless."

Luster looked at her, hid a smile, and grumbled:

"No, I'm just saying. Can't I admire a virtuoso? It's purely academic interest…"

Sunny coughed, then guided them to a table.

As they were sitting down, Luster looked around and asked in confusion:

"By the way, Kimmy… where's Quentin?"

She shrugged.

"He was walking Beth home. So, it will probably be just us two, today."

Feeling something stir a little in his heart, Sunny smiled with genuine mirth and walked away to help prepare their food.

He put extra effort to make sure that these two enjoyed an unforgettable meal.

Later, Sunny heard soft whimpers coming from outside. Opening the door, he saw a peculiar scene.

Aiko, who had left some time ago to run an errand, was floating in the air with a panicked expression. Little Ling was hugging her leg tightly, hanging on it like a monkey.

Huge tears were falling from the little boy's eyes.

"No! Auntie Aiko can't leave! Ling Ling won't let her go!"

Giving up in despair, Aiko stopped trying to float away and awkwardly patted him on the head.

"It's… it's alright, puppy! I'm not leaving yet! But if you don't let go… I won't be able to walk! Ouch! M—my leg!"

Ling's dad finally managed to pull his son off her, hugged him tightly, and gave Sunny a helpless smile.

"Sorry about that…"

Nevertheless, Little Ling's tears were dried up soon. The boy was fully preoccupied with a bowl of ice cream… but he still insisted on holding Aiko's hand and refusing to let her out of his sight even for a minute.

His father sighed.

"Are you really leaving?"

Sunny glanced at him, then smiled.

"Yes. Well… for a while. Hopefully, we'll be back one day."

Little Ling's dad looked a little sad. The two of them were on friendly terms and spent quite a bit of time together due to the cooperation between the Beast Farm and the Brilliant Emporium. Sunny felt a bit touched to know that he would be missed.

"In the meantime, please take care of your family. Most people do not know, but you should be aware that we are in for some tough times"

His former soldier nodded somberly.

"I know. I will… you take care too, Master Sunless."

Sunny gripped his shoulder for a moment, then went over to the table and patted Ling Ling on the head.

The little boy looked up at him and smiled shyly.

"Uncle!"

Sunny smiled, as well.

"I'm sorry, Ling Ling. This is the last bowl of ice cream I'll be able to treat you with for a while."

Little Ling's tiny face instantly turned downcast. His doleful expression was both incredibly cute and comical.

"I… I see…"

Sunny sighed.

"But when I return, I'll give you two… no, three entire bowls of ice cream. And a huge mug of hot chocolate. And even a cake."

The little boy's eyes widened.

"Really?"

Sunny nodded.

"Of course! In the meantime, take care of your mom. She looks tough, but she is actually a huge softie. You need to treat her well."

Little Ling grinned.

"Ling Ling treats mommy the best!"

Then, he giggled and added with excitement:

"Mommy is huge! Uncle said so!"

Sunny's expression faltered.

"No, wait a second, don't say that. Most importantly, don't say that I said that. Not huge… a huge softie. Repeat after me, Ling Ling. Softie… softie…"

But the little boy was already distracted by something else and refused to listen.

Looking at him, Sunny paled a little, and then sighed.

'Maybe it's a good thing that I am leaving Bastion… I need to get the hell out of here before Effie hears that!'

There were more customers after that, as well.

A lot of female customers, in particular, were sighing as they threw secretive glances at Sunny. He was even worried that there was something wrong with his cooking today, but Aiko simply rolled her eyes and assured him that everything was fine.

Sunny could only carry on in bewilderment.

'I guess people get really attached to their favorite cafés…'

But then, eventually…

It was time to close the doors.

It was already dark by then, and the young moon was slowly rising in the sky. Sunny remained on the porch for a while, looking at the city and breathing deeply. He had grown used to the scent of Bastion in the past year, without even knowing that he had.

In hindsight… it had been a wonderful year.

But now, it was time to leave.

He sighed.

'I'm going to miss this.'

With that, Sunny turned around, walked inside, and closed the door behind him.

Chapter-1840: Bathed in Starlight

High in the sky above Bastion, a beautiful island was hovering, shrouded in the veil of clouds. Illuminated by pale starlight, a white pagoda stood upon it, piercing the heaven.

Nobody noticed when the flying island started to move.

Not only because it was dark, and most of the citizens were already asleep, but also because a perfect illusory copy of the island remained in its place when it did.

Due to the attempted assassination of Changing Star, Clan Valor gained leverage over the government. They used some of that leverage to summon Saint Thane, a government Transcendent who held power over dreams and illusions, to Bastion. His task was to hide the fact that the Ivory Island had left the sky above Mirror Lake.

In truth, it was heading for Godgrave.

Before that, however, the flying island made a stop.

Descending from the great heights, it reached the shore of the lake and landed on the water. A tall wave rose, flooding a few streets that were closest to the shore for a few moments.

Among them was a quiet street where a cozy brick cottage stood.

At that moment, something bizarre happened.

The cottage stirred, and then rose, revealing countless metal legs that were attached to its bottom. Turning around, it trotted to the shore and then nonchalantly dove into the water.

The cottage swam surprisingly well for a brick building.

Covering the distance to the island swiftly, it climbed ashore, shook energetically, and then looked around in confusion… it was as if it was unsure where to plop down.

Eventually, the bizarre creature simply lowered itself to the ground where it stood.

As soon as it did, the island slowly rose from the water and moved north.

Soaring into the sky to hide behind the clouds, it flew above the sleeping city… and left it behind.

At that time, the door of the cottage opened, and a young man with alabaster skin and raven-black hair walked out of it.

Sunny stepped on the soft soil of the Ivory Island, inhaled deeply, and smiled.

"What a beautiful sight."

Nephis was standing a few steps away, looking at him calmly.

She responded to his smile with one of her own.

"Ivory Island is indeed beautiful at night. Welcome."

He looked at her silently for a while, then shook his head softly.

"I wasn't talking about the island."

Neph's eyes widened a little.

"Oh…"

She hesitated for a few moments, then looked away in embarrassment and gestured to the dark expanse of emerald grass.

"Would you like to take a walk?"

Sunny nodded with a smile.

"Sure."

He offered her his arm, and when she took it, asked quietly:

"Once we reach Godgrave, where do you want to go? I'm afraid there are no beaches there… but I can still prepare a picnic."

Nephis chuckled.

"We won't reach it for a while. There's plenty of time to decide."

They walked silently side by side, eventually reaching the edge of the island.

Below, a sea of clouds was shining with reflected starlight. Above, a myriad of stars was burning in the distant sky.

Neph's eyes were like two radiant stars, as well.

But much more beautiful.

She studied the night sky for a while, then sighed.

"I… find myself in doubt, now that we are leaving for war. It happens sometimes, albeit rarely. And I can't really reveal that side of myself to anyone, because my strength is their strength. But I am afraid sometimes, too. Can we really win? Can we really defeat the Sovereigns?

Even if we do… what then?"

A fragile smile appeared on her lips.

"Of course, I always banish these doubts, since I can't afford them. You just… caught me before I could steel myself, tonight."

Sunny looked at her silently for a while.

Eventually, he smiled.

"Of course, we can win. Of course, we will defeat the Sovereigns. And everything that comes after them."

Nephis faced him, her ivory face bathed in starlight.

"Why are you so sure?"

Sunny chuckled.

When he spoke, his voice was calm and confident.

"Because that is our will. Who dares to stop us?"

She was standing so close that he could hear her heartbeat… and his own.

The stars were shining in the lightless sky, illuminating the world with soft radiance.

In that radiance, her lips looked even softer.

Only war awaited them ahead.

...Placing his hands on her shoulders, he gently pulled her in and leaned forward.

His heart was beating like a caged beast.

When their lips touched gently, it was as though the whole world was engulfed with heat.

And Sunny wasn't satisfied with that gentle touch. He was hungry for more.

Wrapping his hands around her, he pulled her closer, until their bodies were pressed tightly against each other, with no space for anything except passion between them.

Nephis slowly raised her hands and embraced him, as well, responding to his kiss.

At the same time, their kiss grew more passionate, as if both had been starving for each other's lips for a long, long time.

And, intoxicated by the taste of her...

Sunny finally felt complete.

***

Somewhere else, a ruined fortress bathed in the light of a shattered moon. In the remnants of its main keep, a tall dais stood. There was no throne and no altar on the dais… instead, there was an iron anvil, and a man who stood in front of it, swinging a heavy hammer.

He was tall and broad-shouldered, with a lean, but mighty physique. Powerful muscles rolled under his glistening skin, and his sweat was evaporating in the unbearable heat of a crucible. His bare torso was painted in shades of vermilion by its angry light.

The man had dark hair and a thick, but dignified beard. The expression on his noble face was harsh and austere, and his grey eyes were as cold as tempered steel.

There was a sword taking shape under his hammer on the iron anvil.

Eventually, the man put the hammer aside and quenched the incandescent blade in water. The reflection on its surface convulsed when it was pierced by the sharp tip, and was then obscured by rising steam.

A few moments later, the blacksmith pulled the sword out of the water and looked at it closely.

Then, the intensity of his gaze was replaced with contempt and disappointment.

Gritting his teeth, the man tossed the beautiful blade aside.

It fell from the dais and flew down.

What waited below was a mountain of swords, each so masterfully crafted that many warriors would eagerly kill for the right to wield one.

The newborn blade landed on the top of the mountain and joined its countless siblings, laying there…

Abandoned, and forgotten.

Far away…

A vast hall cut in blue ice was drowning in darkness.

In the center of the hall, a tall throne stood, illuminated by the ghostly light of dancing flames.

A corpse of a breathtakingly beautiful woman was sitting on the throne, dressed in a regal red gown. Its hem spilled down the steps of the throne like a river of blood.

The woman's chest was pierced by a sword, which pinned her to the back of the throne.

Two dead youths stood on both sides of the throne, waiting in silence.

Then, the silence was broken.

Pieces of ice fell to the floor and shattered as the dead woman's hand slowly rose. Her pale, long fingers wrapped themselves around the blade of the sword.

Soon, there was the sound of metal breaking.

In the next moment, the ice hall — and the entire mountain encompassing it — shuddered.

And someplace else…

A gaunt man was sitting in the dust, wearing a tattered spacesuit. The visor of his helmet was cracked, and the oxygen in the tank attached to his back had long run out.

Nevertheless, the gaunt man was somehow still alive.

He had been motionless for a while, but now, he finally moved.

Raising his head, he looked at a beautiful blue disk floating in the great darkness above him.

His cracked lips twisted into a smile.

"How curious."

That was what he wanted to say…

But, of course, no sound escaped from his lips, since there was no air to transmit it.

The man tried to sigh, but failed for the same reason.

He shook his head in dejection and moved his lips again.

If someone was there to read them, they would have read:

"...It's starting."

The war for the throne of humanity had begun.

[End of Volume Eight: Lord of Shadows.]